

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 5

ZHENG ZHI

AFC Player of the Year
Award for Guangzhou
Evergrande's influential
captain

ISSUE
5

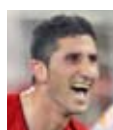
January 2014



DON'T DELAY. **PLAY!**

PLUS AFGHANISTAN

Once war-torn nation laying
the foundations for the future
with success both on
and off the field



SANHARIB MALKI

Globetrotting Syria striker
reflects on his decision to
represent his homeland
at international level



HAKEEM SHAKIR

The coach at the centre of
Iraq's rebuilding process
and the start of a new
golden generation



SHINJI ONO

Much-travelled Japanese
legend on his new life in
Australia ahead of return
to ACL this year



CONTENTS



26 – HAKEEM SHAKIR
Coach Hakeem Shakir is the man behind Iraq's recent upturn in fortunes at all levels having been involved with the national team for over 20 years

28 – SANHARIB MALKI
Syria striker Sanharib Malki has enjoyed a successful career in Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands and now Turkey having started his career playing alongside a host of household names

34 – IN FOCUS: AFGHANISTAN
Afghanistan's victory at last year's SAFF Championship, coupled with a second successful domestic season, have laid the foundations for a bright future for the once war-torn nation

40 – SHINJI ONO
Japanese legend Shinji Ono is enjoying a new lease of life with Australia's Western Sydney Wanderers following a remarkable career

46 – AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE DRAW PREVIEW
We take an in-depth look at each of the teams who have qualified for the group stage of the 2014 AFC ChampionsLeague, while also previewing the play-offs

52 – CLUB FOCUS: GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE
The newly crowned AFC Champions League winners Guangzhou Evergrande on their aims to build on their incredible continental and domestic success to create a lasting legacy for Chinese football

Regular Sections

4 – In the News	71 – AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers
58 – Toyota Top Goal Scorer	72 – AFC Futsal Championship Qualifiers
60 – AFC Asian Cup Update	74 – Inside AFC
64 – AFC Champions League	78 – Great Grounds of Asia
66 – AFC Cup	
68 – AFC U-19 Women's Championship	

AFC QUARTERLY

Issue No. 5

January-March 2014

Official quarterly publication of the Asian Football Confederation

Published on behalf of the Asian Football Confederation by World Sport Group

Asian Football Confederation
AFC House, Jalan 1/155B, Bukit Jalil
5700 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

Tel: +603 8994 3388
Fax: + 603 8994 2689

www.the-afc.com

President:
Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

Vice Presidents:
Zhang Jilong
HRH Prince Abdullah Ibni Sultan
Ahmad Shah
Yousuf Yaqoob Yousuf Al Serkal
Moya Dodd
Ganesh Thapa

FIFA Vice President:
HRH Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein

FIFA Executive Committee Members:
Dato' Worawi Makudi
Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

AFC Executive Committee Members:
Dr Hafez Al Medlej, Richard Lai, Zaw Zaw, Mahfuza Akhter Kiron, Praful Patel, Kohzo Tashima, Ganbold Buyannemekh, Ali Azim, Sayyid Khalid Hamed Al Busaidi, Makhdoom Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat, Winston Lee, Dr Tran Quoc Tuan, Susan Shalabi Molano, Han Un-gyong

General Secretary:
Dato' Alex Soosay

Managing Editor:
Michael Church

Editor:
Andrew Mullen

Deputy Editor:
Daniel Pordes

Designer:
David Chung

Photos:
World Sport Group, Agence SHOT, Adnan Hajji Ali

Any views expressed in AFC Quarterly do not necessarily reflect those of the Asian Football Confederation. The reproduction of photos and articles – even partially – is prohibited unless permission has been sought from the editors and a reference is made to the source.



Strike for your goals
with a **Winning Team** behind you.

No matter in investments, life insurance and retirement services or even in football, the key to success is the same. It's all about having a team behind you of knowledgeable professionals who match ambitions with skills. Their professional in-depth knowledge and teamwork ensures success.

With 150 years of experience, more than 100,000 employees and representatives in over 40 countries, ING has the resources and dedication to deliver tailored financial services solutions to you, as we already do to 85 million clients. That means analyzing your needs, providing you with well-rounded expert advice and passing this advice on in a clear concise and understanding way.

So, when there's a clear target in mind, choose ING to achieve your goal.



Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

A New Year brings excitement, hope and expectation: 2014 will be no different and it comes on the back of a highly successful 12 months that highlighted once more the improvements and developments being made throughout Asian football.

Our sport hit new levels in 2013, with greater heights achieved through increased professionalism, and the signs are that the benchmarks set previously will be surpassed again in 2014.

In the coming year, Australia, Iran, Japan and Korea Republic will travel to Brazil with the support of the entire confederation as they aim to underline the progress made across Asian football at the FIFA World Cup finals in June and July.

Last year our men's youth teams proved that Asian football continues to grow and develop at global level and there can be little doubt that, in 2014, their female counterparts will build on those successes in their equivalent competitions over the next 12 months.

The club game, too, is flourishing and with the newly expanded AFC Champions League we will see in 2014 a more inclusive competition from which the benefits will be felt across even more leagues and national associations.

We have also taken steps with regards to transparency by adopting the AFC Code of Ethics and Electoral Code. We have also pledged to protect the integrity of the sport during the AFC Annual Awards, which also saw talent being recognised for their contribution to Asian football.

With greater levels of professionalism come a higher standard of football, and with it we will see Asia continue to move ever closer to the summit of our sport.

Our progress has been rapid, our growth continual and the excitement around Asian football palpable, so let's continue working together to ensure the future remains bright and success within our grasp.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President

THE PINNACLE



D4 / D800

*At the heart of the image*

Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary



Dear friends,

On and off the pitch, 2013 was another monumental year for Asian football, culminating in China and Guangzhou Evergrande captain Zheng Zhi being named the AFC Player of the Year at our Annual Awards Night in Kuala Lumpur in late November.

Zheng's influence on Guangzhou's AFC Champions League victory highlighted the importance of experience, dedication and determination in reaching the highest levels and he follows in the footsteps of a long line of fine professionals in claiming the highest individual accolade in Asian football.

Throughout 2013 there were positives aplenty, among the most inspirational being Afghanistan's victory in the SAFF Championship; there are lessons that can be learned by many of us from a nation that has emerged from such prolonged upheaval to garner success.

Iraq, too, showed that football can be a unifying, positive factor for everyone by advancing to the last four of the FIFA U-20 World Cup under the tutelage of their enthusiastic and passionate coach, Hakeem Shakir.

No doubt 2014 will deliver many more moments to savour as our representatives travel to Brazil for the FIFA World Cup finals while the AFC Champions League becomes ever more inclusive, allowing the benefits of professionalism to filter deeper into our game.

The finals of the AFC Asian Cup also grow ever closer and the iconic Sydney Opera House will host the draw for the finals on March 26 as preparations for the showdown in January 2015 gather pace. The excitement is sure to build in what is shaping up to be a wonderful year ahead.

Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary

Gallery



Flying High

Italian FIFA World Cup-winner Marcello Lippi became the first coach to win both the AFC Champions League and UEFA Champions League after Chinese champions Guangzhou Evergrande edged out FC Seoul from Korea Republic on away goals following a 3-3 draw on aggregate in last year's final.

Gallery



End Of The Road

Jordan's historic 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign came to an end in November after losing 5-0 on aggregate to Uruguay in their intercontinental play-off despite Hossam Hassan's side earning a commendable goalless draw in the second leg in Montevideo.

Gallery



Top Of The Class

Asia's finest were honoured at the AFC Annual Awards at the end of November, with China's Zheng Zhi named AFC Player of the Year having captained Guangzhou Evergrande to a historic victory in the AFC Champions League, with team-mate Muriqi taking home the AFC Foreign Player of the Year accolade.



Zheng Zhi Crowned AFC Player Of The Year

GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE CAPTAIN WINS ASIA’S TOP INDIVIDUAL HONOUR AHEAD OF FELLOW MIDFIELDERS JAVAD NEKOUNAM AND HA DAE-SUNG AT A GALA NIGHT IN KUALA LUMPUR IN NOVEMBER.

Guangzhou Evergrande captain Zheng Zhi capped a remarkable year after being named AFC Player of the Year. Veteran midfielder Zheng played an instrumental role as Guangzhou won the AFC Champions League to become the first Chinese side to win continental honours since 1990, while the 33-year-old also helped the club reclaim their domestic crown. The China international edged out Iran and Esteghlal midfielder Javad Nekounam and FC Seoul captain Ha Dae-sung to follow in the footsteps of 2001 recipient Fan Zhiyi. “I am very excited after coming last year without an award, it’s very special this time. There is a special feeling of winning this award at the age of 33. It’s a big occasion

for me to win this award,” said Zheng, who lost out last year to Korea Republic international Lee Keun-ho having been nominated alongside Iran’s Ali Karimi. “This season has been fantastic, not only for me but the whole team. “Honestly, I thought that I would not win the award again after I was confined to being only a nominee last year, but it’s down to my team-mates without whom it would have been impossible to win this time. “I am not young anymore, but I still have desire to produce my best, not only for the club, but for my national team as well.” Zheng’s Guangzhou team-mate, Muriqui, was named AFC Foreign Player of the Year, while the club was also named AFC Club of the Year. Muriqui’s latest plaudit made it a hat-

trick of awards after being named MVP and top goalscorer as Guangzhou won the AFC Champions League title by beating Korea Republic’s FC Seoul on away goals following a 3-3 draw on aggregate. The Brazilian was chosen for the recognition ahead of team-mate Dario Conca and FC Seoul striker Dejan Damjanovic. “I am so happy to have won this award, but this was the result of teamwork rather than individual efforts,” said Muriqui. “I’m also very happy with our performance in the ACL this year.” Japan international Yuto Nagatomo, meanwhile, was also honoured as the Inter Milan midfielder was named AFC Asian International Player of the Year ahead of compatriot Keisuke Honda and Korea Republic international Son Heung-min.



Asian Teams Learn World Cup Fate

DECEMBER’S DRAW IN BRAZIL SAW JAPAN, AUSTRALIA, IRAN AND KOREA REPUBLIC LEARN THEIR OPPONENTS FOR THE 2014 FIFA WORLD CUP ALTHOUGH JORDAN MISSED OUT AFTER LOSING THEIR PLAY-OFF AGAINST URUGUAY.

Asian champions Japan, Australia, Iran and Korea Republic learnt their fates for the group stage of the 2014 FIFA World Cup following December’s draw in Brazil. Reigning AFC Asian Cup champions Japan were drawn alongside Colombia, Greece and Cote d’Ivoire in Group C, while Australia will join 2010 finalists Spain and the Netherlands as well as Chile in Group B. Group H sees Korea Republic face Belgium, Algeria and Russia, while Iran are scheduled to take on Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nigeria and Argentina in Group F. “It could be better, but it could be worse too,” said Japan coach Alberto Zaccheroni, who oversaw Japan’s fifth successful qualification for the FIFA World Cup.

“I am not just saying this because we have ended up in the same group, but I have considered Colombia one of the World Cup favourites since well before the final draw.” Australia finished runners-up to Japan in the final round of qualifiers to earn a third consecutive appearance at the FIFA World Cup. “There’s no doubt we have a tough group,” said Australia coach Ange Postecoglou. “Australia’s sporting history is full of stories where we have embraced the underdog status and we will come to the World Cup looking to create some magic moments that all Australians will remember for years to come.” Korea enter their eighth consecutive FIFA World Cup having, like Japan, reached the Round of 16 in South Africa.

“People may think that it’s an easy group, but that’s not true,” said Korea coach Hong Myung-bo. “We shouldn’t underestimate any of our opponents because they’re all strong teams that are capable of going through.” Iran are returning to the FIFA World Cup for the first time since featuring in the group stage in Germany 2010. “For my players, it should be an honour to play against these rivals and it is important they go out and enjoy every minute of every match, eager to make it to the second round,” said coach Carlos Queiroz. Jordan had been unable to join the quartet in the draw after losing their intercontinental play-off 5-0 on aggregate to Uruguay at the end of November despite earning a creditable goalless draw in the second leg in Montevideo.



Iraq, Korea Republic Claim Team, Youth Recognition

Iraq's maiden semi-final appearance at the 2013 FIFA U-20 World Cup was recognised at the AFC Annual Awards with Hakeem Shakir's side named AFC Men's National Team of the Year, with highly-rated defender Ali Adnan taking home the AFC Youth Player of the Year accolade.

Having progressed to the semi-finals in Turkey with an unbeaten record following wins over Paraguay and Korea Republic in the knockout stage, Iraq were eventually edged out by Uruguay on penalties.

Adnan was ever-present during Iraq's campaign in Turkey, with the full-back scoring a stoppage-time equaliser against England before opening the scoring with an outrageous free-kick in the semi-final defeat by Uruguay.

"It is the recognition of our efforts in a difficult but memorable

year," said Shakir, who is also the coach of the Iraq national team. "We had several challenges but finally impressed the world by our football. This award also shows that Iraqi football is heading in the right direction and we have good strategies in place."

AFC Women's U-19 Championship winners Korea Republic claimed the AFC Women's National Team of the Year award, with tournament MVP and top scorer Jang Sel-gi named AFC Youth Player of the Year.

Elsewhere, Choi Yong-soo was named AFC Coach of the Year after leading FC Seoul to the AFC Champions League final, with Asako Takemoto winning the Women's award having led Japan to success at the 2013 AFC U-16 Women's Championship.

- AFC Diamond of Asia** Dr. Chung Moon-joon
- AFC Dream Asia Award** Myanmar Football Federation
- AFC Fair Play Association of the Year** Chinese Football Federation
- AFC Futsal Team of the Year** Chonburi Bluewave (Thailand)
- AFC Futsal Player of the Year** Suphawut Thueanklang (Chonburi Bluewave)
- AFC Assistant Referee of the Year (Women)** Allyson Flynn (Australia)
- AFC Assistant Referee of the Year (Men)** Toshiyuki Nagi (Japan)
- AFC Referee of the Year (Women)** Sachiko Yamagishi (Japan)
- AFC Referee of the Year (Men)** Benjamin Williams (Australia)
- AFC Member Association of the Year for Grassroots Football** Japan Football Association
- AFC 'Inspiring' Member Association of the Year** Chinese Football Federation
- AFC 'Developing' Member Association of the Year** Jordan Football Association
- AFC 'Aspiring' Member Association of the Year** Pakistan Football Federation



Familiar Foes For Champions Guangzhou

Defending champions Guangzhou Evergrande will face familiar foes Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in the group stage of the AFC Champions League following December's draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Marcello Lippi's side became the first Chinese side to be crowned continental champions in 23 years after edging out Korean counterparts FC Seoul on away goals following a 3-3 draw on aggregate in the final having advanced from the group stage alongside 2006 champions Jeonbuk.

And having also faced 2011 finalists Jeonbuk in the group stage of their maiden continental campaign a year earlier, Guangzhou will be joined in Group G by Japanese Emperor's Cup winners Yokohama F. Marinos and one of two teams who advance from the play-offs in the East when the group stage gets underway at the end of February.

"We will play against Jeonbuk for a third time, so they're old opponents but they're also friends," said Guangzhou Evergrande president Liu Yongzhou. "I think it is fate that we've been drawn against them."

"I believe this year all of the Chinese clubs will devote themselves to doing their best in the AFC Champions League. They will fight for China and we believe the other Chinese clubs will do well."

Beaten 2013 finalists FC Seoul will face J.League champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima, A-League Grand Final winners Central Coast Mariners, and another play-off winner in Group F.

Elsewhere in the East, K-League Classic champions and 2009 AFC Champions League winners Pohang Steelers will meet Thai double winners Buriram United, China's Shandong Luneng and Japan's Cerezo Osaka in Group E.

And in Group H, A-League Premiers and AFC



Champions League debutants Western Sydney Wanderers will face 2011 champions Ulsan Hyundai, China's Guizhou Renhe and Japan's Kawasaki Frontale in Group H.

In the West, two-time champions Al Ittihad will make their return to the competition in Group C alongside inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain from the United Arab Emirates as well as Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz and one of two play-off winners from the West.

"The draw is good and fair for us," said Al Ittihad team manager Atef Tashkandi. "We were not in the AFC Champions League last year and this gives us more motivation to do well this year and get into the final."

"Al Ain are a good team, but we are also a good team. Also, every team from Iran is difficult and we will have to work hard."

Fellow former winners Al Sadd from Qatar also return to the competition in Group D alongside Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal, Iran's Sepahan and Al Ahli from the United Arab Emirates having won the 2012/13 Qatar Stars League title.

Elsewhere, Saudi champions and AFC Champions League debutants Al Fateh will be joined in Group B by two-time semi-finalists Bunyodkor from Uzbekistan and Iran's Foolad as well as a team advancing from the play-offs.

Finally, Iran champions Esteghlal will look to build on last year's semi-final appearance as the two-time Asian Club Championship winners begin their campaign in Group A against Qatar's Al Rayyan, Al Jazira from the UAE and Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab.

The four outstanding places in the group stage of the AFC Champions League will be decided by the play-offs which take place over three rounds at the start of February.

Following a change to the competition format, the AFC Champions League will remain separated geographically to ensure East and West representation in November's final.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Esteghlal (IRN)	Al Fateh (KSA)	Al Ain (UAE)	Al Sadd (QAT)	Pohang Steelers (KOR)	Sanfrecce Hiroshima (JPN)	Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)	Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)
Al Rayyan (QAT)	Foolad (IRN)	Al Ittihad (KSA)	Al Ahli (UAE)	Buriram United (THA)	Central Coast Mariners (AUS)	Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN)	Guizhou Renhe (CHN)
Al Jazira (UAE)	Play-Off Winner	Tractorsazi Tabriz (IRN)	Al Hilal (KSA)	Shandong Luneng (CHN)	FC Seoul (KOR)	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)	Kawasaki Frontale (JPN)
Al Shabab (KSA)	Bunyodkor (UZB)	Play-Off Winner	Sepahan (IRN)	Cerezo Osaka (JPN)	Play-Off Winner	Play-Off Winner	Ulsan Hyundai (KOR)

Jordan, Korea Republic, India, Malaysia Honoured

Jordan, Korea Republic and India have been granted hosting rights for high-profile FIFA events in 2016 and 2017 following decisions by the Executive Committee of football's world governing body.

The first West Asian nation to qualify for the AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2014, Jordan will now host the 2016 FIFA Women's U-17 World Cup.

"By granting Jordan the honour of hosting this tournament, FIFA is investing in football development that would have immeasurable positive impact on the progress of women's football not only in Jordan, but also across the region," said HRH Prince Ali Bin Hussein, FIFA Vice President and President of the Jordan Football Association.

"Jordan, from its people to its public and private sectors, has set

its heart on embracing this opportunity. We are very appreciative to FIFA for their support and we hope to deliver an outstanding U-17 Women's World Cup that sets the bar for FIFA events in the Middle East and makes both FIFA and Jordanians proud."

And having successfully co-hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup with Japan, the FIFA U-20 World Cup will be played in Korea in 2017.

"Previously, we co-hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup with Japan and now we are ready to host the second biggest FIFA competition alone and this means a lot to us. We will do our best to host it successfully," said Korea Football Association President Chung Mong-gyu.

India, meanwhile, will host the FIFA U-17 World Cup 2017, while the 2017 FIFA Congress has been scheduled to take place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Arbil Eye AFC Cup Success

Former finalists Arbil from Iraq are confident of a return to success in the AFC Cup after avoiding nemesis and defending champions Kuwait Sports Club in the group stage following December's draw.

Arbil will face either Shabab Al Ordon or Al Wehdat of Jordan, Bahraini outfit Riffa and the winner of February's qualifying play-off between Kyrgyzstan League champions Alay and Al Dhar'ia of Palestine in Group D having been eliminated from the tournament by three-time winners Kuwait SC on three separate occasions.

After defeating domestic rivals Al Qadsia in the final last year, Kuwait SC will take their place in February's play-offs for the AFC Champions League with a place in the AFC Cup available should they fail to progress through the qualifiers.

"I'm happy that there's no Kuwaiti teams in our group," said Arbil club representative Rebi Ramzi. "We lost three times to Kuwait Sports Club, in the final [2012], semi-final [2011] and quarter-final [2009] stage.

"If Kuwait SC get into the AFC Champions League then there's a big chance for Arbil to win the tournament."

Failure to qualify for the AFC Champions League will see Kuwait SC join 2004 AFC Cup champions Al Jaish of Syria, Nejme from Lebanon and Oman's Fanja in Group B with Al Arabi on standby to fill the place.

Elsewhere in the West, Group A will see either Al Suwaiq or Saham of Oman take on Jordanian debutants That Ras Club and



Safa from Lebanon, in addition to the winners of the play-off between Tajikistan's FC Ravshan and Al Yarmouk of Yemen.

Syrian side Al Wahda will have to wait until the completion of the AFC Champions League play-offs to learn their opponents in Group C as Bahrain's Al Hidd, Kuwait's Al Qadsia and Al Shorta of Iraq are all involved in February's fixtures with Manama, Al Nasaf, and Air Force their potential replacements.

In the East, meanwhile, Group E features three domestic league champions in Indonesia's Persipura Jayapura, Maldivian side New Radiant and I-League table-toppers Churchill Brothers of India as well as Singapore Cup winners Home United.

Group F encompasses Selangor of Malaysia and Maldivian team Maziya Sports and Recreation, along with Arema Indonesia and either Ha Noi T&T or SHB Da Nang of Vietnam depending on the former's fortunes in the AFC Champions League play-offs.

Hong Kong's AFC Champions League hopefuls South China or alternates Sun Pegasus make-up Group G alongside Yangon United of Myanmar, Vietnamese outfit XM Vissai Ninh Binh and Malaysia FA Cup winners Kelantan.

Finally, Group H contains either Tampines Rovers or Balestier Khalsa of Singapore, Indian teams Pune FC or East Bengal, Nay Pyi Taw of Myanmar and Hong Kong's Kitchee.

The AFC Champions League qualifying play-offs concludes on February 15, with the AFC group stage beginning on February 25/26.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Al Suwaiq/Saham (OMN)	Kuwait SC/Al Arabi (KUW)	Al Hidd/Manama (BHR)	Shabab Al Ordon/Al Wehdat (JOR)	Persipura Jayapura (IDN)	Ha Noi T&T/SHB Da Nang (VIE)	Yangon United (MYA)	Tampines Rovers/Balestier (SIN)
That Ras Club (JOR)	Fanja (OMN)	Al Qadsia/Al Nasaf (KUW)	Riffa (BHR)	Home United (SIN)	Arema Indonesia (IDN)	XM Vissai Ninh Binh (VIE)	Nay Pyi Taw (MYA)
Safa (LIB)	Al Jaish (SYR)	Al Shorta/Air Force (IRQ)	Play-Off Winner	New Radiant SC (MDV)	Selangor (MAS)	South China/Pegasus (HKG)	Pune/East Bengal (IND)
Play-Off Winner	Nejme (LIB)	Al Wahda (SYR)	Arbil (IRQ)	Churchill Brothers (IND)	Maziya Sports & Recreation (MDV)	Kelantan (MAS)	Kitchee (HKG)



Australia To Begin Title Defence Against World Champions

THE MATILDAS WILL BEGIN THE DEFENCE OF THEIR AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP TITLE AGAINST FIFA WORLD CUP WINNERS JAPAN FOLLOWING NOVEMBER'S FINALS DRAW IN HO CHI MINH CITY.

Defending champions Australia will face FIFA World Cup winners Japan, hosts Vietnam and tournament debutants Jordan in the group stage of the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup.

The Matildas won the continental crown for the first time in 2010 after edging out DPR Korea on penalties following a 1-1 draw, and will look to defend their title in Ho Chi Minh City in May.

Eight-time champions China, Korea Republic, Thailand and Myanmar will make up Group B for the tournament, with the top five teams earning qualification for the 2015 FIFA World Cup in Canada.

"I think the two groups are very equal so I am

very happy to have Japan in the group," said former Netherlands international Hesterine de Reus, who replaced 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup winner Tom Sermanni as Australia coach at the start of the year.

"I am looking forward to a very competitive competition and we are eager to qualify for the World Cup.

"I worked in Jordan before I took this job, as I was the coach of the women's national team, so I know Jordan a bit. We watched all the teams at a tournament in Myanmar in September, and there are still six months to go to get information about our opponents, so I think everything is well organised and planned."

Despite winning the 2011 FIFA Women's

World Cup, Japan have never won the AFC Women's Asian Cup having lost to Australia in the semi-finals in 2010 before their historic triumph in Germany a year later.

Hosts Vietnam are seeking a maiden appearance in the knockout stage, while Jordan are the first-ever West Asian nation to qualify for the finals.

China won the last of their eight titles in 2006 having also reached the semi-finals on home soil in 2010, with Korea Republic last reaching the final four in 2003.

Thailand won the title in 1983, but are seeking a first appearance in the knockout stage since finishing third in 1986, while Myanmar have yet to progress beyond the group stage.

CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

ZHENG ZHI WAS NAMED 2013 AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR HAVING PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE'S HISTORIC AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SUCCESS LAST YEAR, COMPLETING A FAIRYTALE STORY AFTER RETURNING TO HIS HOMETLAND FROM EUROPE THREE YEARS EARLIER WITH THE CLUB IN THE SECOND DIVISION.

By: Andrew Mullen Photos: : World Sport Group/Asian Football Confederation



Zheng Zhi was only starting out on his football journey the last time a Chinese side claimed a continental title. But now, with the coveted AFC Player of the Year award also sitting in pride of place in an ever-expanding trophy cabinet back in his hometown in the province of Liaoning – home of the 1990 Asian Club Championship winners

– Guangzhou Evergrande's AFC Champions League winning captain can consider himself a member of a very elite club. While Guangzhou's formidable South American attacking trio of AFC Foreign Player of the Year Muriqi, Dario Conca and Elkeson grabbed the headlines, the hard yards put in by Zheng in midfield for Marcello Lippi's side in the AFC Champions League last year were a key factor for the now



three-time Chinese champions.

Lippi's decision soon after his arrival in mid-2012 to shift the 33-year-old into midfield after a year-and-a-half spent featuring principally in defence was one of the unheralded but vital factors in Guangzhou's ascent to the summit of Asian football.

The benefits were felt keenly in the AFC Champions League as Zheng started every game in Guangzhou's second appearance in the continental competition, with the former Shenzhen Jianlibao and Shandong Luneng player missing only a handful of minutes in the knockout stage.

By the end of the campaign, Zheng and Lippi were sharing the winners' rostrum in front of their own fans to hoist the trophy into the air having edged out FC Seoul on away goals to claim the continental title, and a little more than two weeks later Zheng became the first Chinese player to win the AFC Player of the Year award since Fan Zhiyi in 2001.

Zheng had been edged out by Korea Republic international and 2012 AFC Champions League MVP Lee Keun-ho a year earlier after being nominated alongside Iran's Ali Karimi. But on this occasion, Iran and Esteghlal midfielder Javad Nekounam and FC Seoul captain Ha Dae-sung were forced to watch on as Zheng claimed the continent's top individual accolade.

"I am very happy to have received the

Player of the Year trophy. It is a reward of my devotion and I hope this trophy will give more confidence to young players in China," says Zheng. "I have put the trophy on a special trophy wall in my house in my home town."

"AFTER I HAD DISCUSSIONS WITH THE MANAGERS OF CLUB, I FIGURED OUT THIS CLUB HAD VERY BIG AMBITIONS SO I MADE A DECISION TO JOIN THEM SO WE COULD PROGRESS TOGETHER."

A trophy laden November, which was subsequently followed by Guangzhou's appearance at the 2013 FIFA World Cup in Morocco, completed a rapid rise for China's newest footballing heavyweight and ensured the shelving on Zheng's domestic display will be groaning under the weight of rapidly accumulated silverware.

Having won the Chinese title in 2004 with Shenzhen Jianlibao and Shandong Luneng in 2006, Zheng returned to China following spells in Europe with Charlton Athletic and Celtic to join ambitious second division side Guangzhou mid-way through the 2010 campaign.

Relegated to the second tier following a

match-fixing scandal, Guangzhou had been bought by Evergrande Real Estate Group, with president Xu Jiayin insisting the Super League title would be won in three years and the AFC Champions League crown would be delivered within five.

"The team was in the second division in China when I came back," says Zheng. "After I had discussions with the managers of club, I figured out this club had very big ambitions so I made a decision to join them so we could progress together."

Zheng was no stranger to either competition having tasted domestic success with both Shenzhen and Shandong.

He had also helped Shandong reach the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League in 2005 having watched on as Liaoning beat Japan's Nissan FC to win the 1990 Asian Club Championship.

A 25-year-old Zheng was in the Shandong side who held Al Ittihad to a 1-1 draw at home in the first leg of their 2005 quarter-final tie before the defending champions ran riot in the return fixture and posted a 7-2 win to advance 8-3 on aggregate on their way to winning a second consecutive continental title.

"I had just began training as a footballer when Liaoning were crowned Asian champions," he says. "My hometown is Liaoning, so I watched Liaoning become Asian champion on TV with great excitement.

"The first championship with Shenzhen meant a lot to me, but now the AFC Champions League victory is a continental title playing against much stronger opponents who are also champions.

"Shandong were a very strong team. I joined Shandong in order to improve myself and of course win more championships. And I was also able to experience the AFC Champions League with Shandong."

It was while at Shenzhen, having switched from Liaoning's youth team, that Zheng was given the chance to play in midfield.

"I have tried many positions in my career," he adds. "I played in defence, then I tried midfield after I came to Shenzhen because I was young and coach Zhu Guanghu found that I could do very well in midfield."

Success with Shandong, as the club won the domestic double in 2006, subsequently led to interest from Europe and Zheng eventually joined English Premier League side Charlton on loan.

The first Chinese player to play for Charlton, Zheng featured in 12 games in the Premier League but was unable to stop the Addicks being relegated.

But having tasted life at the top level in Europe, Zheng completed a permanent move to London despite Charlton's relegation and he scored nine goals in his first season in the second tier to finish runner-up in the player of

Left Winning the 2013 AFC Champions League.

Right Zheng helped China reach the final of the 2004 AFC Asian Cup.

"GOING TO ENGLAND WAS NOT A HARD DECISION FOR ME BECAUSE I WAS ALWAYS THIRSTY TO PLAY FOOTBALL IN EUROPE, WHICH IS THE CENTRE OF FOOTBALL."

the year poll.

"Going to England was not a hard decision for me because I was always thirsty to play football in Europe, which is the centre of football," he says. "My dream came true and I was able to show my ability to the whole world.

"There were many differences between the two leagues. The Chinese league didn't have a long history at that time, but I hope now more young players can play in England because they play very fast with very quick transition."

While Zheng's first 18 months in England had gone well personally, the 2008 English season was to start on a sour note.

China's performance at the Olympic Games – in which Zheng played as one of three permitted overage players – in Beijing had been less than stellar, with the team

Above Zheng signed for Celtic in September 2009.

eliminated after picking up just one point from a group that featured New Zealand, Belgium and Brazil. To make matters worse, a groin injury picked up against the Belgians impacted on the start of the new season in England after Zheng missed the final game against Brazil due to suspension.

He returned briefly to the Charlton side but, after another injury setback, Charlton's relegation to League One – the third tier of English football – was all but confirmed once Zheng had again recovered enough to make his comeback.

Charlton had been keen to keep hold of the midfielder to boost their chances of an instant return to the Championship, but after 70 appearances and 11 goals, Zheng opted against agreeing a new contract and eventually joined Scottish heavyweights Celtic in September 2009 on a two-year deal.

"I was on loan at Charlton for the first half season, but we were sadly relegated. But I didn't change to another team because I had already settled into this team very well," says Zheng. "But the club changed a lot in two years, mostly because of financial problems. Many good players left so I went to Scotland in order to remain at a high level."

Then Celtic manager Tony Mowbray had tried to sign Zheng from Charlton a year earlier when in charge of West Bromwich



Left First leg of the 2013 AFC Champions League final.

Above Representing China

Albion and the former Middlesbrough defender showed his faith in Zheng's talents by handing the China captain his Celtic debut against fierce cross-Glasgow rivals Rangers in the Old Firm derby at Ibrox.

Celtic lost 2-1, but Zheng enjoyed an impressive debut in the Scottish Premier League. "Celtic have a long history in Scotland and my first match was a national derby," he says. "I knew about football games in Europe before I got there, but the first match was the most intense game I've ever experienced."

In total, Zheng made 16 appearances for Celtic before being released in July 2010.

He was quickly snapped up by Guangzhou and led the southern Chinese outfit to an instant return to the top-flight by winning the second division title.

A first Super League title soon followed in 2011, which earned Guangzhou a maiden appearance in the AFC Champions League.

That ended in the quarter-finals as Zheng again fell foul of Al Ittihad, with the two-time champions prevailing 5-4 on aggregate despite the arrival of Lippi prior to their Round of 16 success over FC Tokyo and having won their group ahead of three fellow domestic champions.

"Lippi was very disappointed that we didn't make it as far as the semi-finals, but next year we will prepare according to the AFC

Champions League schedule and we will give the competition more priority," said Zheng at the 2012 AFC Annual Awards.

"It is the first year for the club to play in both the AFC Champions League and the domestic league in parallel and what we have learned will prepare the team better for next year."

That focus certainly paid off in 2013 with the only black mark a defeat in the FA Cup final by Guizhou Renhe as Guangzhou retained the domestic title for a third consecutive season.

Zheng also helped China move to within touching distance of an 11th consecutive appearance at the AFC Asian Cup in Australia.

China, who Zheng helped reach the final on home soil in 2004 only to lose to Japan, need to avoid defeat against Iraq in March's final qualifier to secure qualification for Australia having failed to reach the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

"Playing for my country is most important, but I regret that we couldn't win AFC Asian Cup at home in 2004. I think I will have very few opportunities to win this cup in the future," says Zheng. "The 2015 AFC Asian Cup will be my last AFC Asian Cup and I'm pretty sure we will be Australia and I hope we can perform well."

Before then, Zheng will enjoy a well-earned break following Guangzhou's appearance at the 2013 FIFA Club World Cup in Morocco before thoughts turn to how many more shelves will need to be added to his trophy wall at home.



Zheng Zhi

Nationality: China
DOB: 20/08/1980
Position: Midfielder
Current club: Guangzhou Evergrande (China)
Previous clubs: Shenzhen Jianlibao, Shandong Luneng (both China), Charlton Athletic (England), Celtic (Scotland)

GOLDEN TIMES AHEAD FOR IRAQ

AFTER IRAQ'S 2007 AFC ASIAN CUP VICTORY RECEIVED WORLDWIDE ACCLAIM, THE ONCE WAR-RAVAGED NATION AGAIN CLAIMED GLOBAL HEADLINES AS A SEMI-FINAL APPEARANCE AT LAST YEAR'S FIFA U-20 WORLD CUP BROUGHT A NEW GENERATION OF STARS TO THE FOREFRONT, WITH COACH HAKEEM SHAKIR CENTRAL TO THE REBUILDING PROCESS.

The year 2013 heralded such a revival in the fortunes of Iraqi football, that talk has begun of a new golden generation of players to repeat the feats of the legendary 2007 Asian Cup winners, should they qualify for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia.

This time last year, the senior team made it to the finals at the Gulf Cup and over the summer, with the world watching, Iraq claimed a historic fourth place at the FIFA U-20 World Cup as the nation's youngsters shocked the world. Iraq also qualified for the AFC U-22 Championship finals in Oman with an unbeaten record.

From leading the national team at the regional tournament in Bahrain, to guiding Iraq's youth on their unprecedented FIFA U-20 World Cup campaign in Turkey, there has been a consistent influence throughout: the man of many coaching hats, Hakeem Shakir.

"All the success we have had has been because of this new golden generation and I am sure this generation can continue our success in the upcoming matches," says the 51-year-old Shakir.

"If we can keep this group of players together I hope that they can achieve a lot of success, and especially in the big competitions."

Shakir has been involved in some form of Iraqi football for over 20 years and has coached the national team from the U-17 level upwards.

Indeed, such was Shakir's omnipresence that at one period, from late 2012 to early 2013, the multi-tasking maestro was in charge of three Iraqi national teams – the senior team, the Olympic team and the youth team - at the same time.

But it was in 2011, in his second stint as

Iraq U-20 manager, that he came across a group of players that would begin to mould into the newest stars of the men's national team.

The side advanced to the 2012 AFC U-19 Championship finals with an unbeaten record in the qualifiers and reached the final undefeated, only to lose to Korea Republic on penalties after a 1-1 draw.

However, the top three finish meant qualification for the 2013 FIFA U-20 World Cup the following year in Turkey, where the team were about to become the talk of the tournament.

After winning Group E by beating both Egypt and Chile, and salvaging a draw with England thanks to a sumptuous last-minute equaliser from full-back Ali Adnan, Iraq knocked out Paraguay in the Round of 16 and Korea Republic at the quarter-final stage before suffering penalty shootout heartbreak against Uruguay in the semi-finals.

And at the AFC Annual Awards in November, recognition of their efforts was duly given as the Iraq U-20s were named AFC National Team of the Year and the prodigiously talented Adnan won AFC Youth Player of the Year, while Shakir received a nomination for AFC Coach of the Year.

"It is great to be recognised for your work and your success and when the success comes after so many challenges, getting a chance to win an award shows you are on the right direction," says Shakir.

"Our success came after so many challenges. Football might still not be in the country but through our hard work we are achieving success and winning awards."

Just as the fabled 2007 AFC Asian Cup winners proved their worth at U-22 level

– eight of the players who were in the squad that finished fourth at the 2004 Olympic Games, including icons Younus Mahmoud and Nashat Akram, started in the continental final against Saudi Arabia three years later – so, too, have the new stars that Shakir has brought through the ranks looking to make an impact at the tournament in Australia next year.

All 11 of the players who played for him at the 2012 AFC U-19 Championship finals have received senior call-ups. Along with Adnan, Mohammed Hameed, Humam Tareq, Sarif Salman, Mohanad Abdullaheem, Mohammed Jabbar Rabat and Ali Faez Atiyah have all played in the most recent 2015 AFC Asian Cup qualifying games under watchful eyes that belong to a familiar face.

Following his caretaker role overseeing the 2012 West Asian Football Federation Championship and 2013 Gulf Cup finalists, Shakir was restored to the helm of the senior men's team in September after a series of bad results led to the dismissal of his predecessor, Serbian coach Vladimir Petrovic.

However, back-to-back defeats against regional rivals Saudi Arabia in the qualifying stage mean that should this new generation of players wish to emulate the 2007 vintage, they must pass their next test: the crucial final qualifying match against China in March.

Having won just two of their qualifiers so far, and with the Chinese national team currently two points ahead, Shakir knows this game is a must-win for him and his men.

"We have to prove our success through more hard work and achieve more success," he adds.

"We now have a very important match against China in the Asian Cup qualifiers and in this match we can qualify for the Asian Cup. We can prove that we are on the right track so we will look to continue our success."





HOME COMFORTS

BELGIUM-RAISED SANHARIB MALKI WAS IN THE SAME TEAM AS A NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLD NAMES SET TO FEATURE IN THE FIFA WORLD CUP LATER THIS YEAR. BUT AFTER CHOOSING TO REPRESENT THE COUNTRY OF HIS BIRTH, THE MUCH-TRAVELLED SYRIA STRIKER WILL BE AMONGST THE SPECTATORS THIS SUMMER.

By: Colin Pereira • Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images





When the FIFA World Cup takes place this summer, Sanharib Malki will be just one of the billions of football fans watching the events as they unfold in Brazil.

But it could have all been very different for the 29-year-old if not for a fateful decision that he made six years ago.

Born in the north-eastern Syrian city of Qamshili, Malki emigrated to Belgium with his Aramean family at the age of six.

He played for Union Saint-Gilloise in the country's lower leagues, and after a solid season in the top flight with Roeselare, he joined Germinal Beerschot in 2007.

A pacey striker who is strong in the air and an accomplished finisher with either foot, Malki netted 16 goals in his first year with the Antwerp club as he finished as the division's joint top scorer.

That earned him an invitation to join the Belgium under-23 side for a training camp in the build-up to the 2008 Olympic Games where he found himself in the company of several players who would soon make their mark at

English Premier League clubs.

"It was a very talented squad in which we had quality players like Vincent Kompany, Thomas Vermaelen, Marouane Fellaini, Kevin Mirallas and Jan Vertonghen," says Malki, who now plays for Turkish Super Lig club Kasimpasa.

However, Belgium was not Malki's only option as far as international football was concerned as he also qualified to play for Syria and for his mother's homeland of Turkey.

He ultimately decided to represent the country of his birth and made his international debut for the Qasioun Eagles in a FIFA World Cup qualifier against Kuwait in June 2008.

"I have spent most of my life in Europe but I still have a strong feeling for Syria," explains Malki, who speaks English, French, Dutch, Arabic and his native Aramaic while he is also learning Turkish.

"I was born in Syria and my father is from there so while I have a European identity now, I am still proud to play for the national team of Syria."

He scored his first international goal in a 3-1 win over the United Arab Emirates in a FIFA World Cup qualifier later that month,

Above Celebrating scoring for Roda JC in their relegation play-off against De Graafschap in May 2013.

although it was not enough to keep Syria in contention for a spot in South Africa as they missed the Final Round of the Asian qualifiers by just a single goal.

However, Malki would get the opportunity to play at a major international tournament when Syria qualified for the AFC Asian Cup for the first time in 15 years in 2011.

He failed to score in Qatar as Syria lost narrowly to Jordan and to eventual champions Japan, but played a key role in attack for his country who registered their first win against Saudi Arabia in a competitive match in 35 years.

"It was a very good experience especially the first game when we won 2-1 against Saudi Arabia. We had a lot of supporters there and they created a great atmosphere because it was the first time that we had beaten Saudi Arabia in a long time," recalls Malki.

"The second game against Japan we were so close to getting one point until they scored from a late penalty and in the last game we

needed to beat Jordan, but unfortunately we lost 2-1 and we were eliminated.

“But that’s football. Sometimes you win but sometimes you have bad luck and you lose.”

But while he was getting an opportunity to play regular international football for Syria, things were not going so well for Malki at club level after his prolific form at Beerschot attracted the interest of other Belgian teams and he was snapped up by KSC Lokeren just before the transfer deadline in the summer of 2009.

It, though, would prove an unhappy move for the Syria international who scored only three goals in his first season at a club that found themselves battling to avoid relegation.

And worse was to follow when Malki found himself frozen out of the first team when Peter Maes took charge of Lokeren the following season.

“When I arrived at Lokeren, they played me as a right midfielder instead of a striker so I didn’t score many goals in my first season there,” he says.

“But things got very bad in the second season because the new coach decided not to play me.”

Barely used by Maes, Malki spent the second half of the 2010-11 season on loan at Greek second division side Panthrakikos where he managed just a solitary goal.

Although his stock had dwindled after two disappointing seasons, he still had an admirer in former Beerschot coach Harm van Veldhoven, and he took Malki to Dutch club Roda JC on a free transfer in the summer of 2011.

Malki became the focal point of the Roda attack and the move paid huge dividends as he

plundered 25 goals for the Kerkrade club to finish the season as the joint second-highest scorer in the Eredivisie.

Van Veldhoven left the club in the summer but Malki continued to score on a regular basis under new head coach Ruud Brood, with 17 goals in the 2012-13 season even as Roda found themselves in a relegation scrap.

Roda managed to beat the drop thanks in no small part to the Syrian, who netted a hat-trick in a crucial play-off win against De Graafschap.



Malki’s goalscoring exploits at Roda attracted plenty of interest in his services last summer, especially from clubs in the Gulf, but after weighing up his options, he moved to Istanbul to join ambitious Turkish Super Lig side Kasimpasa in a 1.5 million Euro deal.

“Before I came to Turkey, I only knew about the big clubs like Fenerbahce, Galatasaray and Bekistas. But I saw the ambition of the club when I met up with them and I

became very interested in joining them,” explains Malki, who has signed a three-year contract with Kasimpasa.

“They have put a lot of money into the club as their ambition is to play in the European club competitions next year. They have good coaches as well as good players like (Netherlands international forward) Ryan Babel and (Sweden international goalkeeper) Andreas



Top Left Against Jordan at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup.

Above Against Saudi Arabia at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup.

Right Playing against Japan at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup.

Issakson.”

The transition from the Eredivisie to the much tighter Super Lig was not an easy one for Malki, who managed only two goals in his first 12 league matches for Kasimpasa before he scored in back-to-back games against Galatasaray and Antalyaspor in early December.

“The style of football in Turkey is more closed and there are not so many chances to score,” he says.

“I also have a different role now because we play a counterattacking style and I am playing alongside another striker (Argentinian Ezequiel Scarione), who has been scoring more goals. However, I really don’t care who scores because I just try my best to help my team.”

Earning a spot in the UEFA Champions League or Europa League is certainly not beyond Kasimpasa who matched traditional heavyweights Fenerbahce, Galatasaray and Bekistas in the first half of the season.

But on the international front, things are not looking too bright for Malki with Syria failing to qualify for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and struggling to make it to the 2015 AFC

Asian Cup in Australia.

The troubles in Syria have resulted in the national team being forced to play all of their qualifying matches outside the country, with their home games taking place in Tehran.

And while the youthful side without Malki enjoyed success in the West Asian Football Federation Championship in 2012, they have found things much tougher in the AFC Asian Cup qualifiers.

As one of the senior players in the Syrian squad and with experience of playing in Europe, Malki is now one of the team’s leaders.

Although he has spent little time in Syria in recent years, with most of his extended family now living in Jordan and Turkey, he has great empathy with his national team-mates and the team’s supporters who have been affected by the turmoil in their homeland.

“I have a different situation because I have now been living in Europe for 23 years but when I see what is happening in Syria, it’s very dramatic and we as players want to help out

our people as much as possible,” he says.

“The players talk about it because they see the news and when there’s an explosion somewhere, everybody is concerned for their families.

“Nobody says anything but mentally I think that they are affected and it’s very difficult. But we are professional players and we have to focus on the game.

“People want results and they want us to win. And if we win, then they will be happy and it will be a good moment for them.”

But while his international footballing future is tied to Syria, Malki remains a Belgian at heart and there is no question as to whom he will be supporting during the FIFA World Cup.

“Belgium have not played at the World Cup for a long time but they now have a good generation of players and I think that they are one of the best teams in the world,” he says.

“And while I play for Syria, I am also a Belgian so I will be cheering for them and hoping that they do well in Brazil.”



Sanharib Malki

Nationality:
Syria

DOB:
01/03/1984

Position:
Forward

Current club:
Kasimpasa (Turkey)

Previous clubs:
Union St-Gilloise,
Roeselare,
Germinal Beerschot,
Lokeren (all Belgium)
Panthrakikos (Greece)
Roda JC (Netherlands)





REBIRTH OF A NATION

AFGHANISTAN'S VICTORY IN THE FINAL OF THE SOUTH ASIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION CHAMPIONSHIP IN SEPTEMBER 2013 SAW THE TROUBLED NATION TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY AND SIGNALLED A REMARKABLE RETURN TO PROMINENCE FOR ONE OF THE AFC'S FOUNDING MEMBERS FOLLOWING THREE DECADES OF OPPRESSIVE RULE BY THE TALIBAN.

By: Andrew Mullen Photos: World Sport Group/Courtesy of Afghanistan Football Federation

Afghanistan are one of the 12 founding members of Asian football having been present on the sidelines of the 1954 Asian Games in Manila. But with the AFC celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2014, football in once war-torn Afghanistan is just a handful of years into the process of rebuilding after three decades of much publicised Taliban rule had left the country as a whole in ruins.

That process has, though, started in impressive fashion with Afghanistan winning the 2013 South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) title with a 2-0 win over two-time back-to-back winners India in Nepal in September.

Football also returned to the country, with Afghanistan hosting their first international match in 10 years in August as the home side beat Pakistan 3-0 in Kabul prior to the start of the

second season of the eight-team Afghan Premier League (APL), which was concluded in October.

"During the Taliban era everywhere was war, there was no freedom and no human rights. We had football competitions and activities within the country but only in the capital city and that was a bad time for the history of football in Afghanistan," says Sayed Ali Reza Aghazada, the 22-year-old General Secretary of the Afghanistan Football Federation.

"Afghanistan is one of the countries which founded the AFC as we were founded in 1922. But the three decades of war stopped Afghanistan in every area.

"We had nothing; we had to start from below zero. We didn't have a field, we didn't have an office and there were no educated people. It was very difficult as some countries have been developing for 50 years, but after 10 years Afghanistan became SAFF champions."





Above Afghanistan celebrates the SAFF Championship victory.

Left & Below Afghanistan beat India 2-0 to win the SAFF Championship.



potential,” says Aghazada. “We are trying to find a lot of talent as there are a lot of Afghans in Canada, the US and Europe.”

But with FIFA recognising there are just under 20,000 registered players with over half a million in total, focus is also firmly on continuing the rapid development of the APL.

The league is made up of eight teams representing regions across the country, with the 18-match season played at the AFF Stadium over three months and broadcast nationally.

De Maiwand Atalan represents the south



of the country that includes the regions of Kandahar and Helmand which often attract news headlines for other reasons.

The 26 players initially selected for each team are selected from eight regional tournaments

3-0

Afghanistan beat Pakistan in their first home international in 10 years

with the trials for the 2013 season documented and broadcast as part of a reality TV series “Maidan-e-Sabz” which translates as “Green Field.”

Teams eventually whittle their squad down to 18 ahead of the start of the league, with this process also documented on “Maidan-e-Sabz.”

Players are provided with travel, accommodation and expenses for the duration of the league by the AFF, with matches broadcast live on TV.

Two teams containing refugees from Pakistan travelled to Afghanistan to participate in tournaments, while a number of players returned from Iran seeking a place in an AFL side.

“We hope that the AFL will continue to

Below Afghanistan beat Pakistan 3-0 in their first home international in 10 years in August.



Left Shaheen Asmayee won the 2013 Afghan Premier League.

Success at the SAFF Championship, which saw Afghanistan complete an unbeaten campaign having lost the 2011 final 4-0 to six-time champions India, led to wild vibrant celebrations for two days on the streets across the country – scenes which would have been unimaginable a few years earlier.

1922

Afghanistan Football Federation founded

The sight of women joining in the festivities as the team returned home to a heroes’ welcome also underlined the process with the country.

“The federation started to change two or three years ago and these changes helped us make plans and the first match we hosted against Pakistan showed the world we can host an international match and that Afghanistan can follow a plan,” adds Aghazada.

“We beat Pakistan 3-0 and this was a big achievement for Afghan people. Then, when we won the SAFF Championship, people came out of their houses and hugged each other and it didn’t matter where they were from, this showed the federation has the support of the people of Afghanistan.”

Nine players in Afghanistan’s squad play for teams in the APL, with around half earning their call-ups following performances in the countries domestic league.

Afghanistan goalkeeper Mansur Faqiryar, though, is one of a growing number of players plying their trade overseas.

Faqiryar was named MVP at the SAFF Championship having saved two penalties in the semi-final win over hosts Nepal and is the first-choice goalkeeper for German fourth-tier side VFB Oldenburg.

Players from Afghanistan can also be found in other leagues across Europe as well as the United States, India and Bahrain,

2013

Afghanistan won the SAFF Championship for the first time

while with refugees across the globe, the AFF is constantly seeking to identify new talent.

“During three decades of war in Afghanistan we had a lot of refugees and those refugees are playing football in Europe and USA, while we also have footballers in Afghanistan who have a lot of



With both international and domestic sponsors and a slick appearance after two successful seasons, hopes are that the league will expand to include up to 16 teams by 2020 after financial responsibility of the current clubs is transferred to the private sector.

Plans are also in place to introduce a more traditional home-and-away format within five years.

In addition to the regional events which selected the players for the APL teams, 18 clinics for over 2,000 boys and girls were staged alongside the main tournament.

"We had Grassroots festivals, even in Kandahar and Helmand, for both boys and girls during 2013," says Aghazada, who was appointed General Secretary aged just 20.

"We are also focusing on the women's game. We sent them to Qatar for a friendly and won 2-0 and we reached the semi-finals of the SAFF Championship against India.

"We also have a lot of festivals for women in the capital and we have league for women which is supported by the federation.

"We have also sent the U-16 and U-19 teams to India. We want to have one of the best women's national teams in South and Central Asia by 2018, but the problem in Afghanistan is the culture that when a lady is married she cannot continue with football. But we are trying to find some refugees in the USA."

The AFF have applied for their club teams to join the AFC President's Cup, while next up for the national team is the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup which offers the winner automatic qualification for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

4,500

The average crowd for the 2013 Afghan Premier League

The Philippines, Maldives, Myanmar, Palestine, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Laos have also qualified for the finals, which will take place in May.

And with 2012 winners DPR Korea having already secured entry for the finals in Australia and 2011 AFC Asian Cup participants India having failed to qualify, Afghanistan are positioned just ahead of the Philippines in terms of FIFA ranking as they eye a first-ever AFC Asian Cup appearance in 2015.

"We have a good plan for the AFC Challenge Cup and we have a couple of friendly matches and we will have a training camp inside and outside of the country," says Aghazada.

"All of the other nations in the AFC Challenge Cup know that Afghanistan are now one of the stronger teams in the tournament and we have a good chance to qualify for the AFC Asian Cup in Australia."

Sport within the county, as a whole, is thriving with the cricket team having qualified for the

2015 World Cup, while Rohullah Nikpai has won back-to-back medals at the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games in Taekwondo.

"We have been able to bring a smile back to the people of Afghanistan," adds Aghazada. "They now have a hope."

Afghanistan have yet to threaten qualification for the FIFA World Cup having only entered the qualifiers in 2006 for the tournament in Germany.

On that occasion Afghanistan lost 13-0 on aggregate over two legs to Turkmenistan in the first round.

However, four years later Afghanistan showed a marked improvement with a 5-1 defeat by Syria at the same stage.

And ahead of the 2014 tournament in Brazil, Afghanistan recovered from losing the first leg of their first round tie 2-0 to Palestine by recording a 1-1 draw in the return fixture.

"The 2022 World Cup is very important for us. We have a lot of talent and potential, we have shown that in the SAFF Championship and AFC Challenge Cup qualifiers, so we hope that we can qualify for the 2022 World Cup," said Aghazada.

"We are working closely with other Arabic countries in the region as well as Japan.

"FIFA are also supporting us and we feel we can achieve this goal."



Left AFF Stadium in Kabul

Above
Afghanistan's women's national team played Annex, a club from the Kabul region, on the morning of the 2013 Afghan Premier League final.

Below
Shaheen Asmayee won the 2013 Afghan Premier League



Q&A

Afghanistan Football Federation President Keramuddin Karim



What has been the biggest challenge since beginning to rebuild football in Afghanistan?

After several decades of civil war in the country, football in Afghanistan, which was a founding member of the AFC and is one of the oldest football federations in the world, was completely destroyed and shattered. However, after the withdrawal of the Taliban regime, football has been reborn and started to take a fresh breath. Having no infrastructure, professional personnel, passion and no government support has caused problems and almost demolished football in the war-torn country.

Have you been surprised by the progress over the last 10 years?

The recent achievements made by Afghanistan's football have not been just made accidentally or unintentionally, but through FIFA's long-term plans designed for Afghanistan, as well as following the AFC's outstanding support. This has paid off and gave a new look to the country's footballing arena. The abilities of the Afghan players and the dedication of the AFF employees has also contributed to the recent achievements.

What are your hopes for the future following the recent successes?

The AFF has long-term plans in order to compete with the big footballing powers in the world. Winning the SAFF Championship and the successful start to the APL have all been the revenue generators highlighting the progress of football in Afghanistan and now our main objective is to qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and we have all the plans set for to achieve this great objective.



THE HAPPY WANDERER

SHINJI ONO HAS SEEN AND DONE IT ALL: AN AFC ASIAN CUP AND AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNER AS WELL AS THE PROUD OWNER OF A UEFA CUP WINNER'S MEDAL AND A THREE-TIME FIFA WORLD CUP VETERAN, THE JAPANESE MIDFIELDER WILL LEAD WESTERN SYDNEY WANDERERS INTO THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FOR THE FIRST TIME HOPING FOR ANOTHER STAB AT CONTINENTAL GLORY.

By: Scott McIntyre

Photos: World Sport Group/George Suresh/Western Sydney Wanderers/Getty Images/Agence Shot





Sydney is a city renowned for its beauty; surrounded by beaches on one side and bushland on another.

Usually when locals talk about being rescued it means from either of these areas – from hazardous surf or the bushfires that are very much part of the Australian summer and certainly not from football.

But that's the expression that Japanese superstar Shinji Ono uses to describe his career-changing move to join Tony Popovic's Western Sydney Wanderers in 2012.

His final season with J.League side Shimizu S-Pulse was plagued by injuries, and a resultant loss of confidence and form, to such an extent that Ono admits he contemplated retirement.

"I had an injury during pre-season with Shimizu and had to get surgery and when I came back it just wasn't right," says Ono. "My condition wasn't good and I was slower; it's true that I thought a little bit about retiring."

"Then, when I had all these feelings, suddenly Mr. Popovic called me and as soon as I heard his plans for the club it was like I was re-born, really it was like he rescued me."

The Wanderers though were not just any old club; indeed at that stage they were barely

a club at all.

With domestic football in Australia suffering from falling crowds and waning interest and with a club based in the northern state of Queensland, Gold Coast United, having their licence revoked, the A-League was at a tipping point.

Football Federation Australia decided to roll the dice and fund a club from the western reaches of Sydney – a vast area home to more than two million people.

A brand new club, cobbled together in barely six months, and based in a region regarded as Australia's footballing heartland, a place which has produced and nurtured some of the country's most famous players – names such as Harry Kewell, Brett Emerton and Tim Cahill.

It's also home to a melting pot of nationalities and cultures, a perfect crystallisation of multi-cultural Australia, and when the club went looking for a headline signing Ono fit the bill perfectly.

The problem was often in trying to convince players to join a club that was formed barely half a year before they played their first A-League match, not that it took much to sway the Japanese star.

"I knew it was a case of not having much to lose but listening to Poppa I was amazed by his vision and passion," he says.

"He clearly explained the structure of the

team and training, but he said he wanted to be the champion in the first year and then I thought I wanted to join this team and give all my energy and show what I can do."

That from a player with, seemingly, little left to prove.

By any measure, Ono is Asian footballing royalty: the youngest player to appear for the Japanese national team; one of a select few to have appeared at three FIFA World Cups; a UEFA Cup winner with Feyenoord, an AFC Champions League winner with Urawa Reds; J.League champion, AFC Asian Cup winner, A-League Premier and AFC Footballer of the Year – the list goes on and on.

Ono's talent was first spotted as a student at Shimizu Commercial High School and he represented the national team at all age levels, but when his first major break arrived, it took not only the then 18 year-old by surprise but indeed the whole of Japan.

Kazuyoshi Miura, still playing at the age of 46, is widely known throughout Asia as the 'King' and in 1998 was perhaps not quite at the peak of his powers but there was, in the public's eyes, little doubt he would head to France for Japan's maiden FIFA World Cup appearance.

Instead, on the eve of the tournament, he was spectacularly axed and his spot taken by a youthful Ono.

"At that moment becoming the youngest player for Japan didn't mean anything special because I was just so surprised to be selected in the squad. Also, King Kazu was out and I was in, can you imagine this? The whole country was talking," says Ono.

"Not just that, but I also got his number, I took his number, I took the Number 11 of King Kazu!

"I didn't want that kind of pressure on myself so I was thinking: 'Why did they give me that pressure?' It was a big moment for Japan with everybody watching on TV, because it was the first time for us and lots of supporters came to France."

Even though he only played 11 minutes in the tournament, it was an event that Ono claims changed his life.

"It did, totally," he adds. "When I walked on the street before nobody recognised me, but after that most people knew who I was, when I was at a restaurant or at a park. So things were different from that point onwards."

A year later, and there was another milestone with Ono an integral part of the Japanese side which reached the semi-finals of the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Nigeria and, as his star continued to rise, he earned a move to Feyenoord in the Dutch top flight in 2001.

"It was the first time I played professionally abroad but I had the confidence to play with

Left & Above
Ono signed for Western Sydney Wanderers in 2012.

Feyenoord," he says. "That's never been a problem for me, even as a schoolboy I believed in my talent, but the first few games I started on the bench and watched and learned about football in the Netherlands and how we wanted to play at Feyenoord.

"At that time there were many good players and I learned a lot there. After four or five games I made the starting 11 and every game I had a big motivation to show my quality.

"It improved me immensely playing against high level players and training too; before when I was in Japan I was scared to play outside because everyone is big and like a fighter.

"Now it's different because many young players play in Europe and know how to play against them, but at that time it was still a big deal for Japanese players."

It was during this stint that Wesley Sneijder apparently said of Ono; "he's the toughest opponent I've ever played" - and the feeling was a mutual one.

"I read in the newspaper that Sneijder had said these things," says Ono. "I don't know if it's true or not, but I'm really happy if he said something like that because I also respected

all the Ajax and PSV (Eindhoven) players because every game we played against them was really tough and they were all great players."

The Netherlands, to the surprise of many, failed to qualify for the 2002 FIFA World Cup, but Ono was selected for his second tournament and this time was more than a bit-part player as Ono started every match as Japan reached the Round of 16 for the first time.

"It was a big advantage for us being at home, but we also had a good balance of veterans, younger players and middle aged guys," he says.

"Our coach, Philippe Troussier, had been with many of us in the youth teams and he was a really good guy and coach – really smart.

"When Troussier became head coach things also changed a lot. He brought us a lot of professionalism and belief. We played the 3-5-2 system; at that time no one used that system but he had the confidence to do it and many J.League clubs after also adopted that style.

"Playing in front of our home fans was amazing and of course we expected more, but it was the first time we passed from the group. It wasn't enough but the memories are good."

Good memories are certainly not something



Shinji Ono

Nationality:
Japan

DOB:
27/09/1979

Position:
Midfielder

Current club:
Western Sydney Wanderers
(Australia)

Previous clubs:
Urawa Red Diamonds
(Japan)
Feyenoord (Netherlands)
VFL Bochum (Germany)
Shimizu S-Pulse (Japan)



Ono has when looking back at his third and, in all likelihood, final FIFA World Cup tilt in Germany.

In another twist linking his future country with his homeland, Japan were drawn to play Australia in the opening Group F match in Kaiserslautern.

After Shunsuke Nakamura scored a floated opener for Japan on 26 minutes, Zico's side were looking good as the clock wound down; Ono was thrown into action with 11 minutes remaining.

Those 11 minutes saw Australia, remarkably, score three goals to win the match and help the Socceroos progress to the Round of 16 at Japan's expense.

"That was a very bad moment, I really don't want to remember Germany at all," he says. "Before I came on we were 1-0 up against Australia and after I came on we gave up three goals and lost. That moment I lost confidence, I lost everything, motivation and desire."

"I didn't play again at that World Cup because I felt a heavy responsibility for us losing that game – it was a really low point."

From the lowest of lows to the highest of highs – Ono's return to the J.League after the FIFA World Cup was one of the most trophy-

laden periods of his career.

In less than two years the midfielder led the Urawa to triumphs in the Japanese Super Cup, the J.League, the Emperor's Cup and the 2007 AFC Champions League.

For a club regarded as one of Asian football's standard-bearers this was their crowning glory – even if it came amidst a backdrop of acrimony between coach Holger Osieck and many of the playing staff.

"That year, with us having won the domestic championship the year before we had a lot of confidence to play in the AFC Champions League and when we won it was a very big experience and exciting," says Ono.

"When we played away games far from Japan our supporters followed us everywhere and they were a big factor but we also had a really, really good team; a good balance of Japanese players with some very good foreigners – Robson Ponte, Washington and also (Marcus) Tulio (Tanaka) and Alex Santos. We had confidence in every game."

Now, seven years on, Ono is looking for one more tilt at AFC Champions League glory in the most unlikely of settings; at a brand-new club in the working class suburbs of Australia's largest city.

But it's those blue-collar values that he feels

will help propel the Wanderers when they start the competition in late February.

"I still clearly remember the first day I arrived at the club," he says. "It was the first time I'd seen all the players give 100% during training. Before some people were lazy or cheating, even in Japan, but when I came here from the first day I was really surprised."

"It meant that I was one of the oldest players on the field and that if I cheated or was lazy then maybe the other players would recognise this and try the same. But if I pushed myself and did hard work then others would also have to do more. Everyday I pushed myself to do more and it was good for me and good for the club because I didn't want to lose a game."

Not only were the Wanderers a brand new club who completed the footballing equivalent of a fairytale by winning the league in their maiden season they also did it under a coach in his first senior job.

Popovic, then a defender at the tail end of his career in Hiroshima, played against Ono in his early days with Urawa.

"There was a big defender in Hiroshima and that was him," says Ono. "But, as I said, he is such a great man and great coach – I have to thank him a lot."

The success of last season came also

Top Left Playing against Jamaica at the 1998 FIFA World Cup. *Bottom Left* 2007 AFC Champions League *Left* Ono joined Feyenoord in 2001. *Above* Playing against Tunisia at the 2002 FIFA World Cup. *Right* Ono joined Shimizu S-Pulse in 2010.

against a backdrop of amazing support from the Red and Black Bloc; a collection of vocal supporters the likes of which had not been seen in the history of the league, so strong that in the current A-League season the club has completely sold out of season ticket memberships.

All of which has some supporters dreaming of continuing this most unlikely of success stories and maybe even winning the AFC Champions League at their first attempt.

The A-League Premiers will begin their maiden continental campaign at home to 2012 champions Ulsan Hyundai from Korea Republic, while the Wanderers will also face Chinese FA Cup winners Guizho Renhe and Kawasaki Frontale from Japan.

"It's a big difference, the AFC Champions League," he says.

"Everyone is excited to be in these games, we don't need pressure on ourselves but just to play and enjoy and play the same way we do in Australia."

"Naturally, I'm looking forward to playing against the J.League opponents because

I still have many friends playing there, but it'll be tough against teams from Korea and China too because there's a lot of quick ball movement and quality and technique but if we put in hard work the same as now I believe we can also achieve big things."

At the age of 34 it is a mark of the man that Ono still has a burning desire to compete and to become a better player.

Watching him on the training ground and at matches the thing that stands out is his enthusiasm. He still maintains that sheer love of the game that first came to him as a child.

"I love this game, I can't even think of finishing and to be honest I always think of King Kazu," says Ono.

"He's still playing and scoring at 46 and I'm always thinking: 'Can I do the same until that age?' If my body holds up I surely will."

"Maybe then I can meet Kazu and hand back that number 11 shirt I took all those years ago!"



ACL BATTLE LINES DRAWN

THE DRAW FOR THE GROUP STAGE OF THE REVAMPED AND EXPANDED 2014 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TOOK PLACE IN DECEMBER TO SET THE STAGE FOR THE LATEST EDITION OF ASIA'S PREMIER CLUB COMPETITION. AFC QUARTERLY LOOKS AT THE TEAMS WHICH HAVE ALREADY QUALIFIED, WHILE ALSO PREVIEWING THE PLAY-OFFS.

While Guangzhou Evergrande's historic AFC Champions League victory at the end of last year still remains fresh in the memory, attention has swiftly turned to the 2014 tournament following December's group stage draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Prior to the draw a number of changes to the tournament were confirmed, notably the decision to play the competition on a zonal basis until after the semi-finals for the next three years.

Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong, India, Jordan, Oman, Bahrain, Iraq and Kuwait were also rewarded with berths in the play-offs, which will take place in February with six places in the group stage to be claimed.

Japan, Korea Republic, Iran and Saudi Arabia were all awarded four direct slots into the group stage, while a home-and-away final of the AFC Champions League for the next three years was also approved by the AFC Executive Committee at the end of November.

The group stage of the 2014 AFC Champions League will begin at the end of February and culminate at the end of April ahead of a home-and-away Round of 16 in May.

The quarter-finals will be played at the end of September and beginning of October, with the semi-finals taking place later that month.

And the latest winner of the AFC Champions League will be crowned in November, with the new format guaranteeing representation from each side of the continent.








But before then, a total of 46 teams have a chance stake their claims to become the next champions of Asia.

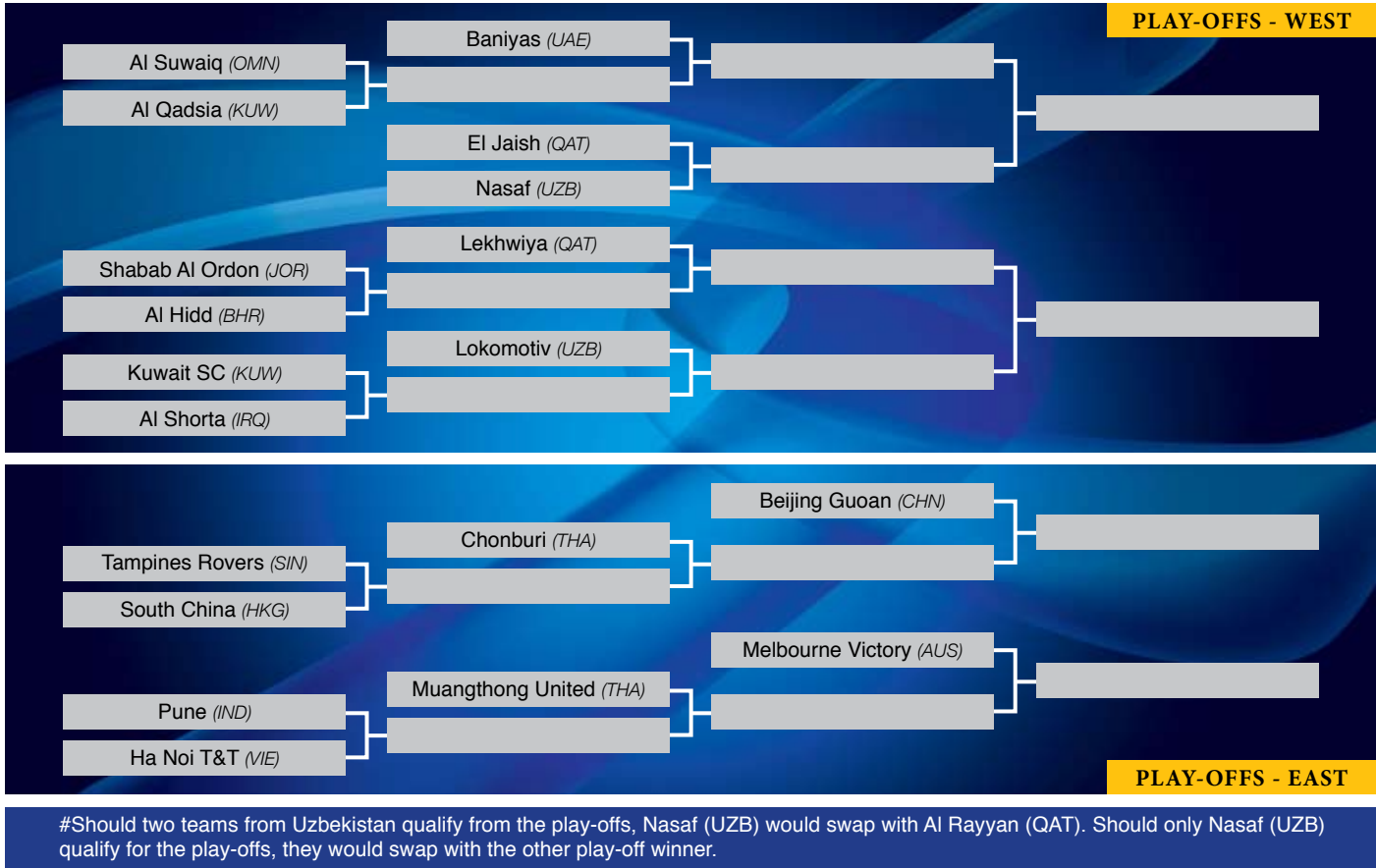


	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	HISTORY	DID YOU KNOW?
<div>ESTEGHLAL</div> <div><div>Iran</div><div>GROUP A</div></div> <div></div>	Esteghlal secured their eighth appearance in the AFC Champions League after winning the 2012/2013 Iran Pro League title.	Semi-finalists in the 2013 AFC Champions League, Esteghlal won the Asian Club Championship in 1970 and 1991. <div></div>	Esteghlal were founded in the mid-1940s by a group of cyclists from the army and are one of Iran's oldest clubs.
<div>AL RAYYAN</div> <div><div>Qatar</div><div>GROUP A</div></div> <div></div>	Al Rayyan ensured a sixth appearance in the group stage of the AFC Champions League after landing a sixth Emir's Cup crown in 2013 after beating Al Sadd 2-1 in the final.	Al Rayyan have won the Qatar title seven times although their last success was in 1995. Al Rayyan have yet to progress from the group stage of the AFC Champions League.	Al Rayyan reached the last 16 of the AFC Cup in 2010 only to lose on penalties to Thailand's Muangthong United. <div></div>
<div>AL JAZIRA</div> <div><div>United Arab Emirates</div><div>GROUP A</div></div> <div></div>	Back for a sixth consecutive AFC Champions League appearance, Al Jazira avoided the qualifying play-offs by just six goals, beating Baniyas Sports Club to third place on goal difference.	Although formed in 1974, the bulk of Al Jazira's silverware has arrived in the last decade having won the UAE League Cup in 2010 and their maiden domestic league title in 2011.	- Al Jazira were established after a merger between two local Abu Dhabi teams, Al Khalidiyah Club and Al Bateen Club. <div></div>
<div>AL SHABAB</div> <div><div>Saudi Arabia</div><div>GROUP A</div></div> <div></div>	Al Shabab finished third in the defence of their Saudi League title. <div></div>	Al Shabab have been one of Saudi Arabia's top clubs in recent years with three league championships and two King's Cup titles over the last nine seasons.	Two of Saudi Arabia's most renowned FIFA World Cup icons, Saeed Al Owairan and Fuad Amin, spent the bulk of their playing careers at Al Shabab.
<div>AL FATEH</div> <div><div>Saudi Arabia</div><div>GROUP B</div></div> <div></div>	Al Fateh will make their debut in the AFC Champions League after winning their first-ever Saudi League title in the 2012/13 season following a 17-match unbeaten streak.	A multi-sports club based in Al Hasa, Al Fateh were formed in 1958 but they only won promotion to the Saudi League in 2009.	Before their maiden title in 2013, Al Fateh had only played three seasons in in the top flight and never placed higher than sixth.
<div>FOOLAD KHUZESTAN</div> <div><div>Iran</div><div>GROUP B</div></div> <div></div>	Foolad will make their second appearance at the continental competition after finishing fourth in the Iran Pro League. <div></div>	Since the Iran Pro League era, Foolad fans have experienced a rollercoaster ride having won the title for the first time in 2005 before being relegated just two seasons later.	Foolad contributed the highest number of players to the national team during the AFC Asian Cup 2004, where Iran finished third.
<div>BUNYODKOR</div> <div><div>Uzbekistan</div><div>GROUP B</div></div> <div></div>	Two-time semi-finalists Bunyodkor qualified for a seventh consecutive AFC Champions League appearance after winning the league and cup double.	Bunyodkor have enjoyed a meteoric rise in their short history having moved up from the regional leagues to the top flight in just two years, winning the Uzbek League title five times since 2008.	Bunyodkor were initially named Kuruvchi when the club was formed in 2005. <div></div>
<div>AL AIN</div> <div><div>United Arab Emirates</div><div>GROUP C</div></div> <div></div>	Al Ain confirmed both their dominance of Emirates football and ninth AFC Champions League campaign with a second consecutive UAE Pro-League title.	Al Ain won the inaugural AFC Champions League title in 2003. <div></div>	Al Ain's Ghanaian striker Asamoah Gyan was the UAE Pro-League's top scorer in the 2012/13 season with 30 goals.

DID YOU KNOW?	HISTORY	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	
Brazilian World Cup winner Bebeto played for Al Ittihad from 2001 to 2002.	One of the oldest clubs in Saudi Arabia, Al Ittihad won consecutive AFC Champions League titles in 2004 and 2005.	Two-time champions Al Ittihad beat Al Shabab in the final of the King's Cup. <div></div>	<div>AL ITTIHAD</div> <div><div>Saudi Arabia</div><div>GROUP C</div></div> <div></div>
The club was established in 1970 by the Iran Tractor Manufacturing Company in Tabriz, hence their name and tractor on the club badge.	Formed in 1970, Tractorsazi have only been back in the top division since 2009 but have already chalked up two runners-up finishes. <div></div>	Tractorsazi ensured back-to-back AFC Champions League appearances with a second consecutive runners-up spot in the 2012/13 Iran Pro League season.	<div>TRACTORSAZI TABRIZ</div> <div><div>Iran</div><div>GROUP C</div></div> <div></div>
Al Sadd were the first team to win the AFC Champions League title after beginning in the play-offs. <div></div>	Prior to edging out Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors to win the 2011 competition, Al Sadd beat Iraq's Al Rasheed in the final of the 1989 Asian Club Championship.	Former champions Al Sadd ensured a return to the competition after winning the 2012/2013 Qatar Stars League title by five points from Lekhwiya.	<div>AL SADD</div> <div><div>Qatar</div><div>GROUP D</div></div> <div></div>
In 2013, Al Ahli won the UAE President's Cup for the eighth time, equaling the national record.	The team was born following a merger in 1974, when Al Wehdah, Al Shabab and Al Najah combined. Three top flight championships soon followed to which they added league titles in 2006 and 2009.	UAE Pro-League runners-up Al Ahli are back in the AFC Champions League for the first time since 2009.	<div>AL AHLI</div> <div><div>United Arab Emirates</div><div>GROUP D</div></div> <div></div>
Al Hilal has won 54 official championships since being founded in 1957. <div></div>	One of Asia's most successful club sides, Al Hilal won the Asian Club Championship in 1991 and 2000 as well as the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and Asian Super Cup.	Al Hilal finished runners-up in the Saudi League, six points behind Al Fateh and only ahead of Al Shabab on goal difference.	<div>AL HILAL</div> <div><div>Saudi Arabia</div><div>GROUP D</div></div> <div></div>
Sepahan were the first non Tehran-based team to win the Iran Pro League, topping the table in the 2002/03 season under manager Farhad Kazemi.	Sepahan are Iran's most successful club since domestic football was professionalised in 2001, with a league-leading four Iran Pro League titles. <div></div>	Sepahan beat arch-rivals Persepolis on penalties to win their fourth Hazfi Cup and also qualify for a 10th AFC Champions League appearance.	<div>FOOLAD SEPAHAN</div> <div><div>Iran</div><div>GROUP D</div></div> <div></div>
Pohang Steelers are the only side to have been crowned Asian champions on three occasions. <div></div>	Pohang claimed back-to-back Asian Club Championship titles in 1997 and 1998 before beating Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad to win the 2009 AFC Champions League crown.	Pohang will appear in the AFC Champions League for a fifth time in six years after winning the K-League Classic title with a dramatic 1-0 win over Ulsan Hyundai on the final day of the season.	<div>POHANG STEELERS</div> <div><div>Korea Republic</div><div>GROUP E</div></div> <div></div>
Shandong are one of the only sides to have never been relegated to the second division since the start of professional league football in China in 1994.	In 1999, Shandong made history by becoming the first Chinese club team to win the league and FA cup double.	Shandong Luneng's 12th place finish in 2012 meant a failure to qualify for last year's AFC Champions League, but they return for a sixth appearance in the competition after finishing second in the Chinese Super League.	<div>SHANDONG LUNENG</div> <div><div>China</div><div>GROUP E</div></div> <div></div>

<div>BURIRAM UNITED</div> <div>Thailand</div> <div>GROUP E</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Buriram qualified for their third AFC Champions League tournament by winning the domestic treble in a repeat of their 2011 exploits.</div> <div></div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Formerly known as Provincial Electricity Authority, Buriram are one of the most successful Thai teams in recent history having averaged two trophies every year since 2008.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Buriram went unbeaten throughout the 2012-13 domestic season, winning 35 games and drawing nine in all competitions.</div>
<div>CEREZO OSAKA</div> <div>Japan</div> <div>GROUP E</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Cerezo took fourth place in the J.League last season, but due to runners-up Yokohama F. Marinos also winning the Emperor's Cup, the Osaka side qualify for their second AFC Champions League appearance.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Cerezo achieved promotion to the top flight in 2009. A third-place finish in their first season back in the J.League resulted in a first-ever place in the AFC Champions League, where they reached the quarter-finals in 2011.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>The word "Cerezo" is Spanish for Cherry Tree, the flower of Osaka city. The team's basic kit color is pink, like the cherry blossom flowers the name is based on.</div>
<div>SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA</div> <div>Japan</div> <div>GROUP F</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Sanfrecce secured a third AFC Champions League appearance after retaining their J.League title.</div> <div></div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Sanfrecce Hiroshima claimed their first J.League title in 2012, but having also appeared in the AFC Champions League in 2010, again failed to progress past the group stage.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Sanfrecce translates as 'three arrows' which refers to a local legend relating to strength through unity.</div>
<div>CENTRAL COAST MARINERS</div> <div>Australia</div> <div>GROUP F</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Central Coast finished second in the 2012/13 regular season before beating Western Sydney Wanderers in the Grand Final.</div> <div></div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Central Coast reached the knockout stage of the AFC Champions League last season for the first time before losing to eventual champions Guangzhou Evergrande.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Central Coast Mariners became only the third A-League side to reach the knockout stage of the AFC Champions League last season.</div>
<div>FC SEOUL</div> <div>Korea Republic</div> <div>GROUP F</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>FC Seoul finished fourth in the K-League Classic last season, but ensured a return to the AFC Champions League as runners-up Pohang Steelers won the FA Cup.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>FC Seoul reached the AFC Champions League final last year only to lose on away goals to China's Guangzhou Evergrande following a 3-3 draw on aggregate following quarter-final appearances in 2009 and 2011.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>FC Seoul relocated to Seoul World Cup Stadium in 2004 from the satellite city of Anyang.</div> <div></div>
<div>GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE</div> <div>China</div> <div>GROUP G</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Defending champions Guangzhou return to the competition after winning the Chinese Super League for a third consecutive season.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>The southern Chinese club made history last November by becoming the first Chinese side to win the AFC Champions League title.</div> <div></div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Guangzhou boss Marcello Lippi is the first coach to win both the AFC Champions League and UEFA Champions League titles.</div>
<div>JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS</div> <div>Korea Republic</div> <div>GROUP G</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Jeonbuk ensured a return to the AFC Champions League for the fifth consecutive season after finishing third in the K-League Classic.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Jeonbuk became the first East Asian side to win the revamped AFC Champions League in 2006 after beating Syria's Al Karamah 3-2 on aggregate before losing the 2011 final on penalties to Qatar's Al Sadd.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors reached the final of the Asian Cup Winners' Cup in 2002.</div> <div></div>
<div>YOKOHAMA F.MARINOS</div> <div>Japan</div> <div>GROUP G</div> <div></div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Yokohama ensured a return to the AFC Champions League for the first time since 2005 having been forced to settle for a runner-up finish in the J.League.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Two-time Asian Cup Winners' Cup champions Yokohama appeared in the group stage of the 1996 Asian Club Championship before returning to the AFC Champions League in 2004 and 2005.</div>	<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Yokohama finished second in their group during both the 2004 and 2005 AFC Champions League but only one side advanced to the knockout stage.</div>

<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Western Sydney have a linkage to the first ever game of football played in New South Wales on August 14, 1880 between the King's School and the Wanderers in North Parramatta.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Western Sydney entered the A-League for the first time in 2012/13 and topped the regular season table before losing the Grand Final to Central Coast Mariners.</div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Western Sydney will make their AFC Champions League debut having won the Premiers title in their first A-League season.</div> <div></div>	<div>WESTERN SYDNEY WANDERERS</div> <div>Australia</div> <div>GROUP H</div> <div></div>
<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Guizhou have changed their name 11 times since their founding in 1995.</div> <div></div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Guiyang-based Guizhou's FA Cup victory over Guangzhou was their first taste of top flight silverware, after losing to the same opponents in the final of the 2012 tournament.</div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Guizhou proved that last year's surprise debut in the AFC Champions League was no fluke with a second consecutive qualification courtesy of their historic FA Cup final victory over Guangzhou Evergrande.</div>	<div>GUZIHOU RENHE</div> <div>China</div> <div>GROUP H</div> <div></div>
<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>Lee Keun-ho was named AFC Player of the Year after helping Ulsan win the 2012 title.</div> <div></div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>Ulsan Hyundai reached the semi-finals on their debut appearance in the AFC Champions League in 2006 before winning the event in 2012 following a spectacular unbeaten campaign.</div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Ulsan Hyundai were forced to settle for a second place finish in the K-League Classic last season after conceding in stoppage time against Pohang Steelers on the final day of the season.</div>	<div>ULSAN HYUNDAI</div> <div>Korea Republic</div> <div>GROUP H</div> <div></div>
<div>DID YOU KNOW?</div> <div>The club's old crest and colours are based on those of Brazilian side Gremio, after a partnership was established between the two teams in March 1997.</div>	<div>HISTORY</div> <div>After promotion in 2004, Kawasaki enjoyed a period of domestic and continental success with three J.League runners-up finishes in five years and two AFC Champions League quarter-final appearances in 2007 and 2009.</div>	<div>HOW THEY QUALIFIED</div> <div>Kawasaki Frontale secured a return to the AFC Champions League for the first time since 2010 after beating Yokohama 1-0 on the final day of the J.League season to take third place.</div>	<div>KAWASAKI FRONTALE</div> <div>Japan</div> <div>GROUP H</div> <div></div>





SHINING LIGHT

GUANGZHOU
EVERGRANDE HAVE
TAKEN BOTH THE
DOMESTIC AND ASIAN
SCENES BY STORM IN
JUST A HANDFUL OF
YEARS, BUT THE ALL-
CONQUERING SIDE
FROM SOUTHERN
CHINA STILL HAVE
GREATER AMBITIONS
TO FULFILL.





Around an hour from the centre of Guangzhou's bustling Tianhe district, down a warren of dusty, potholed side streets that extend past motorcycle repair garages and metal workshops lies a nondescript patch of land in an otherwise anonymous suburb.

Far from the bustling centre of the southern Chinese city's commercial district, the jewels of Guangzhou Evergrande's star-studded squad arrive for their daily workout.

Beside the low-rise clubhouse that serves as the nerve centre for Marcello Lippi and his all-conquering squad sit the trappings of fame and success: amongst a smattering of luxury cars, it is the pink Porsche of China national team striker Gao Lin that is first to catch the eye.

The players – all household names in China and now, increasingly, throughout Asia – parade past for another session with Lippi and his coaching team, men who have experienced and masterminded success at the very pinnacle of the sport.

The latest came in November as Guangzhou became the first Chinese club in 23 years

to win an Asian title with their away goal success over FC Seoul in the final of the AFC Champions League.

"Winning this cup is very important for

"We grew a lot and what we tried to do was reach the level of being able to compete against other teams at this level. We won again, and that's good for Chinese football and for Guangzhou Evergrande."

Guangzhou Evergrande coach Marcello Lippi

Chinese football," said Lippi after becoming the first coach to win continental club titles in Europe and Asia.

"We grew a lot and what we tried to do was reach the level of being able to compete

against other teams at this level. We won again, and that's good for Chinese football and for Guangzhou Evergrande."

Throughout 2013 Guangzhou emerged as the shining light of Asian football and their rise over the last four years is now a familiar tale: bought by the Evergrande group at the start of 2010 after relegation to the second tier of Chinese football following involvement in a match-fixing scandal, the club's rise has been meteoric.

Estimates vary, but anywhere up to US\$100 million has been spent turning Guangzhou into a club that can now proudly call themselves not only China's best, but the champions of Asia.

Promotion from the second division was secured at the first attempt at the end of 2010 after Evergrande's money brought Gao and captain Zheng Zhi to the club, where they were joined by Brazilian striker Muriqui as the genesis of a title-winning side was formed.

Further investment – including a rumoured 10 million euro per year salary for Argentinian midfielder Dario Conca – secured the Chinese Super League title in 2011, the first of three consecutive domestic crowns.

Perhaps the greatest coup of all, though, was the signing of World Cup-winning coach Lippi, whose arrival in mid-2012 has taken Guangzhou to another level, delivering not only continued domestic dominance but the continental crown as well.

But the investment being made into the team is only the start of an ambitious plan to one day field a starting line-up that not only dominates Asian football, but is made up entirely of home-grown talent. Guangzhou's plans lie beyond the mere accumulation of trophies and trinkets.

"There are three strategies that I want to state," said Xu Jiayin, the president of the Evergrande group, one of China's leading real estate developers and owners of the Guangzhou club, in a speech last year. "Firstly, we need to build a very strong team in a short time, and we have achieved that.

"Secondly, I hope Evergrande can field an all-Chinese team in five to eight years. And thirdly, we have to significantly improve Chinese youth football development, and this is why we have built our own academy.

"Having a good club doesn't mean that we will have a good national team but only the

Far Left
Guangzhou president
Liu Yongzhou

Top Left
AFC Annual Awards
2013

Above Tianhe Sports
Center Stadium

Bottom Left
Celebrating the 2013
Chinese Super League
title.

level of the national team can represent the quality of football in a country."

Playing a key role in improving the development of Chinese football has been at the root of much of what Evergrande have planned with their involvement in Guangzhou and, as a result, the club opened their academy in 2011.

Working in conjunction with Spanish giants Real Madrid, the school – based around 100 kilometres outside Guangzhou – covers 1.2 square kilometres and, when finished, it is expected to be the largest in Asia.

The academy will feature 81 full-size pitches and, it is anticipated, be home to 10,000 students. The numbers signed up so far have been encouraging while Real have committed 20 youth coaches.

"The ultimate goal of the school is to

cultivate professional footballers, but we know this will happen only with a small number of students," said Liu Jiangnan, the head of the academy.

"That is why we also put emphasis on regular school courses and working with some universities. We want teenagers who can't make it as a professional to still have the chance to enter university or college and have a future in other fields."

Guangzhou's ambitions, however, do not end at producing top class teams and nurturing high quality talent; the club also has designs on hosting the biggest event in global club football.

Victory in the final of the AFC Champions League not only saw Guangzhou become Asian champions, but qualified Lippi and his team for the FIFA Club World Cup.

After victory over African champions Al Ahly from Egypt, Guangzhou succumbed to European champions Bayern Munich in the semi-finals, but after sampling a taste of the action against the world's best, the club are eager for more.

"This year we won the AFC Champions League and showed the quality of Chinese



professional football,” said Liu Yongzhou, president of Guangzhou Evergrande and a vice-president of the Evergrande group.

“We saw that the other three Chinese Super League teams showed strong desire, determination and confidence too. We are all keen to break new ground in the continental tournament. I hope Chinese teams can have a groundbreaking season in 2014.

“The FIFA Club World Cup showed the gap between us and the top teams in the world. We have a long road to go. The gap is in various aspects and we need to have more chances like this to test our international capacities.”

To host the event – which Guangzhou are reportedly keen to do in 2017 and 2018 – the club will need to overcome some off-the-field hurdles.

“It will have a significant influence on Chinese football if we bid for the Club World Cup,” said Liu Yongzhou. “Evergrande entered the football industry with a strong sense of social responsibility and if the conditions are right we will go for it.

“The only shortcoming is that we lack a professional football stadium, but it is not only

up to us, we need to talk to the government too.”

One option is the renovation of Tianhe Stadium, with plans submitted to increase the

“Our long-term goal is to have our own professional football stadium. A professional football stadium should be the home of a professional club, it will give us roots.”

Guangzhou Evergrande president Liu Yongzhou

capacity from 55,000 to 63,000, with 8,000 removable seats added.

“The expansion of Tianhe stadium will just be a temporary solution,” said Liu Yongzhou. “Our long-term goal is to have our own professional football stadium. A professional football stadium

should be the home of a professional club, it will give us roots.”

While Guangzhou have one eye on the future, in the immediate term the club’s success has sparked a resurgence within the Super League and increased levels of investment in teams and personnel throughout the country.

Neighbours Guangzhou R&F, league runners-up Shandong Luneng and Beijing Guoan are amongst those expected to invest heavily and put up a stronger challenge to a Guangzhou side in 2014 that will be missing star man Conca, who returned to Brazilian club Fluminense after two-and-half years in China.

And that is why, amid all of the talk of academies and plans for the future, the man who has masterminded Guangzhou’s on-pitch success has only one thing to say ahead of the coming season.

“The goal for the 2014 season is simple,” said Lippi recently. “Defend our Chinese Super League title.”



Clockwise from left:
Gao Lin; Prior to the second leg of the AFC Champions League final; Marcello Lippi and Elkeson celebrate the AFC Champions League victory; Elkeson; Facing off against Ronaldinho of Atletico Mineiro at the FIFA Club World Cup; Marcello Lippi at the FIFA Club World Cup; 2012 AFC Champions League quarter-final against Al Ittihad; Muriqui





HOT SHOT HONDA

JAPAN STRIKER KEISUKE HONDA CLAIMED THE TOYOTA TOP GOAL SCORER FOR THE FINAL ROUND OF THE 2014 FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFYING CAMPAIGN AFTER NETTING FIVE GOALS AS THE ASIAN CHAMPIONS ADVANCED TO BRAZIL.

Keisuke Honda won the Toyota Top Goal Scorer for the final round of qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World Cup after netting five goals during Japan's successful campaign to progress to the finals in Brazil in June.

Honda finished two goals clear of team-mates Ryoichi Maeda and Shinji Okazaki as well as Jordan's Ahmad Hayel, Iranian duo Javad Nekounam and Reza Ghoochannejhad, Korea Republic's Lee Keun-ho and Australia's Tim Cahill to claim the 3 million yen prize money.

Hayel had been the only player with a realistic chance of overhauling Honda at the top of the charts going into the continental play-off phase of the competition, but the Jordan striker was unable to add to his three goals netted during the final round in the first leg of the intercontinental play-off against Uruguay.

Honda made a flying start to the final round campaign with four goals in his first two games in Group B, which included a hat-trick against Jordan at Saitama Stadium in June 2012.

And having also netted the Samurai Blue's first goal of the final round in the win over Oman, Honda ended the campaign in style with a stoppage-time equaliser

from the penalty spot against Australia at Saitama Stadium in June which sealed Japan's qualification for Brazil 2014 as Group B winners.

Honda, who featured in six of the eight games during the final round, finding the net on average every 102.5 minutes, opened his account as Japan made the ideal start to their campaign against Oman.

On June 3, 2012, in front of a record-breaking Saitama Stadium crowd of 63,551 - which was the highest ever at the venue that hosted the semi-final of the 2002 FIFA World Cup - Honda's 12th minute side-

Honda doubled his side's lead after 21 minutes following Maeda's opener when he raced onto a sublime pass by Yasuhito Endo before stroking the ball into the bottom corner with his left foot.

He then turned home from close range following good work from Endo and Okazaki before sealing his hat-trick from the penalty spot eight minutes into the second half after Maeda had been brought down.

Honda featured in Japan's next three games as Zaccheroni's side shared a 1-1 draw with Australia before beating both

Iraq and Oman.

He missed the 2-1 defeat by Jordan in Amman due to injury, but Honda returned to the side at Saitama Stadium in June 2013 as Japan became the first side to qualify for the 2014 FIFA World Cup alongside hosts Brazil following a dramatic draw with Australia.

Tommy Oar appeared to have earned Australia a surprise win after his miss-hit cross with eight minutes remaining caught out Japan goalkeeper Eiji Kawashima.

But, with the game edging towards the

footed volley following Yuto Nagatomo's perfectly flighted cross set Japan on their way to a 3-0 win.

Five days later at the same venue, Alberto Zaccheroni's team were in imperious form once again as Honda's hat-trick helped the Japanese towards a 6-0 win.

finale, referee Nawaf Shukralla pointed to the spot in stoppage time after judging the ball had hit Matt McKay's arm and Honda stepped up to thump his shot straight down the middle as Australia goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer dived to his left, sealing Japan's qualification for a fifth consecutive FIFA World Cup.





Finals Picture Takes Shape Ahead Of Asian Cup Draw

WITH ONLY FOUR QUALIFICATION SPOTS REMAINING AFTER FORMER WINNERS IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA WERE AMONGST THOSE TO CONFIRM THEIR PLACES, THE DRAW FOR THE 2015 AFC ASIAN CUP WILL TAKE PLACE AT THE ICONIC SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE IN MARCH FOLLOWING THE COMPLETION OF THE QUALIFIERS AT THE START OF 2014.

With a year to go until the official kick-off of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, the biggest football tournament ever staged in Australia, excitement is

building amongst the fans as preparations hot up for Asia's largest single-sport event with all but four finalists now known.

Saudi Arabia, Iran the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Uzbekistan have all advanced to the finals via the qualifiers to leave just three places remaining.

Defending champions Japan, hosts Australia, Korea Republic and 2012 AFC Challenge Cup winners DPR Korea had already secured qualification prior to the start of the qualifiers, while the winners of the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup will complete the 16-team line-up.

And with the qualifiers culminating at the start of this year, the Sydney Opera House - one of the world's most recognisable landmarks - has been confirmed as the venue for the March 26 draw.

"The Sydney Opera House is an iconic location and the Asian Cup is an iconic sporting event," said Michael Brown, CEO of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 Local Organising Committee.

"It's the perfect fit - a prestigious venue for Asia's most prestigious tournament.

"It's in keeping with our goal to deliver a world class event in January 2015, and it's

fitting that the draw will take place in the great city that will host the final.

"On March 26, we will know exactly which teams are playing who, and where and when they will be playing.

"Fans will finally know which matches they can see in our five host cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Newcastle."

The final games of the qualifiers take place at the start of March ahead of the AFC Challenge Cup finals, with the qualification battle in Group C set to go down to a head-to-head meeting between China and Iraq.

China missed out on securing an 11th consecutive AFC Asian Cup appearance after being held to draws by both Indonesia and Group C winners Saudi Arabia, the two results bookending a 1-0 win in Xian.

The pair of stalemates involving China, meant that despite consecutive losses to Saudi Arabia, Iraq kept their hopes alive with a 2-0 win over Indonesia in their penultimate fixture.

Although China remained second with a two point cushion over Iraq, the 2004 finalists must now avoid defeat against the 2007 champions to secure their passage to Australia.

Both sides, though, could still qualify for the finals with one place available for the best third-place finisher from across all five groups.

Syria, Lebanon, Malaysia and Hong Kong are also in the hunt for that spot, with Jordan eyeing direct qualification from Group A alongside Oman.

Sealing a return to the AFC Asian Cup for the first time since 2007, Oman progressed after a goalless draw in Jordan in October was followed up a month later with a 1-0 win over Syria in Group A as Eid Al Farsi scored a minute into stoppage time.

"I am very happy with my team's qualification to finals of the Asian Cup in Australia. From now on, we have to prepare the team for the final showpiece in Australia," said Oman coach Paul Le Guen after seeing his side extend their unbeaten record in Group A.

Syria, who avenged a 2-1 reverse in Singapore with a comprehensive 4-0 win in the return fixture prior to their meeting with Oman, remain in the qualification picture, however, Jordan can advance with victory over Oman in January having missed the last two rounds of qualifiers due to their 2014 FIFA World Cup play-off against Uruguay.

Elsewhere, the UAE continued their record of qualifying for the finals since 2004 with two consecutive 4-0 victories over Hong Kong and a comfortable 5-0 win over a 10-man Vietnam.

Uzbekistan took second place in the group with late goals from Vokhid Shodiev and Odil Ahmedov enough to beat Hong Kong 2-0 after putting three past Vietnam in both home and away meetings.

"Every win helps us to be stronger and become more powerful and of course we are happy to have qualified for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia," said coach Mirdjalal Kasimov after overseeing





The Asahi Shimbun AJW

KEEPING AN EYE ON ASIA AND JAPAN



The Asahi Shimbun AJW (Asia & Japan Watch)

(<http://ajw.asahi.com/>) is the English-language digital version of The Asahi Shimbun, Japan’s leading daily newspaper. Founded in 1879, The Asahi Shimbun is the nation’s most respected dailyJapanese-language newspaper. AJW offers a multifaceted news lineup for Japan and Asia, especially China and the Korean Peninsula.

The site features quality content unique to The Asahi Shimbun, including analysis and investigative articles, opinion pieces by Asahi reporters and outside experts, and other reports aimed at a global readership.

The Asahi Shimbun has a circulation of nearly 8 million. The newspaper prides itself on its investigative reporting and analyses of business and political coverage, as well as insightful stories on Japan’s fascinating subculture.

AJW offers unparalleled coverage of the Fukushima nuclear plant accident.The coverage has received positive feedback from many experts around the world. The site also runs selected articles from The Asahi Shimbun GLOBE.

Subscription Plans

To commemorate the site’s launch, a special discount rate of \$11.96 (one month) is available. For further inquiries, email Customer Support (customer-support@asahi.com).



Uzbekistan’s sixth consecutive appearance at the AFC Asian Cup.

“We will do our best in Australia and try and do better than we did in Qatar. We always aim big and we always try to achieve our goals.”

Three-time champions Iran, meanwhile, confirmed their place with three consecutive victories as they defeated Thailand home and away before emphatically beating Lebanon 4-1 in Beirut to qualify for Group B.

“Lebanon played well and they deserved a better result as they were fighting throughout the match.” said Iran’s Portugese coach Carlos Quieroz, who also guided his side to the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

“However, we were the better side and we knew how to score goals in order to secure the three points.”

They will be joined by Kuwait who shared two stalemates with Lebanon before a 3-1 home win over Group B bottom side Thailand thanks to two goals from forward Yousef Nasser.

“Despite the good victory today and securing our place in the Asian Cup finals, we still have a lot of things to achieve as the qualification is only the start for a good campaign,” said Kuwait head coach Jorvan Vieira, the Brazilian who sucessfully guided Iraq to the AFC Asian Cup title in 2007.

“We have enough time now to prepare the team for the Asian Cup finals and we will be putting a good plan in order to prepare the team well to be one of the top competing teams in the final competition.”

Finally, 2011 hosts Qatar booked their place at a fifth consecutive AFC Asian Cup after qualifying from Group D as a 65th minute strike from substitute Abdulkareem Al Ali secured a 1-0 win for the 2011 quarter-finalists over Malaysia in the penultimate round of fixtures.

“The result was as expected,” said Qatar coach Fahad Thani after seeing his side remain within a point of group leaders Bahrain.

“We came here with the intent to win and we are happy that we achieved that goal.”

Bahrain, meanwhile, recorded a 2-0 win over Yemen having secured qualification in the previous Matchday with a 1-0 victory against Malaysia.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Oman*	4	3	1	0	4	0	4	10
Jordan	3	1	2	0	5	1	4	5
Syria	5	1	1	3	6	5	1	4
Singapore	4	1	0	3	2	11	-9	3

06/02/13
Oman 1 (Abdulaziz Al Maqbali 39) Syria 0
Jordan 4 (Abdallah Deeb 18, Khalil Ateyah 52, AhmadHayel 55, 74) Singapore 0
14/08/13
Singapore 0 Oman 2 (Qasim Said 15, Eid Al Farsi 45)
15/08/13
Syria 1 (Burhan Sahyouni 49)
Jordan 1 (Musab Al Lahham 57)
15/10/13
Singapore 2 (Mohammed Khairul 62, Quak Jun Yi 82)
Syria 1 (Reja Rafe 89)
Jordan 0 Oman 0
15/11/13
Syria 4 (Sanharib Malki 10, Ahmad Al Douni 83, Quday Jaffal 86, Abdulfatah Al Ahga 90+1) Singapore 0
19/11/13
Syria 0 Oman 1 (Eid Al Farsi 90+1)

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iran*	5	4	1	0	15	3	12	13
Kuwait*	5	2	3	0	8	4	4	9
Lebanon	5	1	2	2	7	12	-5	5
Thailand	5	0	0	5	5	16	-11	0

06/02/13
Iran 5 (Reza Ghoochannejhad 26, 62, Javad Nekonam 45+1, 61, 80) Lebanon 0
Thailand 1 (Chanathip Songkrasin) Kuwait 3 (Theerathon Bunmathan 25 OG, Hussain Fadhel 59, Hamad Aman 65)
22/03/13
Lebanon 5 (Hassan Chaïto 6, 22, Mohamad Haidar 31, Hassan Maatouk 72, Abbas Ali Atwi 90+1) Thailand 2 (Thitiphan Puangjan 49, 85)
26/03/13
Kuwait 1 (Fahad Awad 76) Iran 1 (Masoud Shojaei 45)
15/10/13
Lebanon 1 (Mohamad Ghaddar 50)
Kuwait 1 (Yousef Naser 26)
Iran 2 (Jalal Hosseini 67, Rez Ghoochannejhad 70)
Thailand 1 (Teerasil Dangda 80)
15/11/13
Thailand 0 Iran 3 (Ashkan Dejagah 28, Rez Ghoochannejhad 42, Alireza Bakhsh 90+5)
Kuwait 0 Lebanon 0
19/11/13
Lebanon 1 (Mohamad Haidar 79) Iran 4 (Amirhossein Sadeghi 39, Ashkan Dejagah 51, Javad Nekounam 55, Rez Ghoochannejhad 65)
Kuwait 3 (Yousef Naser 19, 71, Fahad Awad 56)
Thailand 1 (Mongkol Thosakrai 68)

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Saudi Arabia*	5	4	1	0	8	3	5	13
China	5	2	2	1	4	3	1	8
Iraq	5	2	0	3	4	5	-1	6
Indonesia	5	0	1	4	2	7	-5	1

06/02/13
Iraq 1 (Younus Mahmood 66) Indonesia 0
Saudi Arabia 2 (Fhad Al Muwallad 23, Naif Hazazi 77)
China 1 (Zhao Xuri 29)
22/03/13
China 1 (Yu Dabao 90+3) Iraq 0
23/03/13
Indonesia 1 (Boaz Solossa 5) Saudi Arabia 2 (Yousef Al Salem 14, 55)
15/10/13
Indonesia 1 (Boaz Salossa 67) China 1 (Wu Xi 36)
Iraq 0 Saudi Arabia 2 (Osama Hawasawi 34, Nassir Al Shamrani 78)

15/11/13
China 1 (Wu Lei 45+1) Indonesia 0
Saudi Arabia 2 (Taiseer Al Jassam 18, Nassir Al Shamrani 60)
Iraq 1 (Younus Mahmood 45+1)
19/11/13
China 0 Saudi Arabia 0
Indonesia 0 Iraq 2 (Hammedi Ahmed 27, Kerrar Jasim 32)

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Bahrain*	5	4	1	0	7	1	6	13
Qatar*	5	4	0	1	13	2	11	12
Malaysia	5	1	1	3	3	6	-3	4
Yemen	5	0	0	5	2	16	-14	0

06/02/13
Yemen 0 Bahrain 2 (Faouzi Aaish 49, Saad Al Amer 85)
Qatar 2 (Khalfan Ibrahim 55, Yusef Ahmed 90+3)
Malaysia 0
22/03/13
Malaysia 2 (Azammuddin Akil 27, Khyril Muhymeen 88)
Yemen 1 (Aiman Al Hagri 12)
Bahrain 1 (Faouzi Aaish 20) Qatar 0
13/10/13
Qatar 6 (Khalfan Ibrahim 4, 61, 76, Hasan Al Haydos 24, Sebastian Soria 70, Ali Ajfi 90+1) Yemen 0
15/10/13
Malaysia 1 (Norshahrul Idlan Talaha 70)
Bahrain 1 (Abdulla Ahmed Saleh 45+1)
15/11/13
Yemen 1 (Ali Al Sasi 26) Qatar 4 (Sebastian Soria 3, Abdelkarim Hassan 32, Mohammed Kasola 54, Mohamed El Sayed 68)
Bahrain 1 (Ismael Abdulatif 72) Malaysia 0
19/11/13
Malaysia 0 Qatar 1 (Abdulkareem Al Ali 65)
Bahrain 2 (Mohamed Salmeen 2, Faouzi Aaish 88) Yemen 0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE*	5	5	0	0	17	2	15	15
Uzbekistan*	5	3	1	1	9	3	6	10
Hong Kong	5	1	1	3	1	10	-9	4
Vietnam	5	0	0	5	2	14	-12	0

06/02/13
Uzbekistan 0 Hong Kong 0
Vietnam 1 (Huynh Quoc Anh 59) United Arab Emirates 2 (Ahmed Khalil 6, Habib Al Fardan 67)
22/03/13
Hong Kong 1 (Chan Wai Ho 87) Vietnam 0
UAE 2 (Ahmed Khalil 58, Ali Mabkhout 61) Uzbekistan 1 (Shohruh Gadoev 16)
15/10/13
Hong Kong 0 UAE 4 (Ali Mabkhout 30, 55, 90, Walid Abbas 90+5)
Uzbekistan 3 (Sardor Rashidov 69, Au Van Hoan 74 OG, Igor Sergeev 90+2) Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Trong Hoang 77)
15/11/13
Vietnam 0 Uzbekistan 3 (Vokhid Shodiev 40, Igor Sergeev 46, Sardor Rashodiv 89)
UAE 4 (Walid Abbas 40, Salem Al Rejaibi 27, Omar Abdulrahman 80, Ismail Al Hammadi 88) Hong Kong 0
19/11/13
Hong Kong 0 Uzbekistan 2 (Vokhid Shodiev 84, Odil Ahmedov 89)
UAE 5 (Walid Abbas 19, Ismael Matar 25, Ali Mabkhout 31, 37, Ahmed Khalil 90+2) Vietnam 0

*Qualified for 2015 AFC Asian Cup



Guangzhou Reign Supreme



Guangzhou Evergrande became the first Chinese club to win the AFC Champions League at the start of November as Marcello Lippi's side secured the title on the away goals ruling to end FC Seoul's bid to keep the title in Korean hands for a fourth time in five years.

The three-time Chinese Super League champions had taken a huge step towards handing China a first continental title in 23 years with two crucial away goals in a 2-2 draw in the first leg at Seoul World Cup Stadium at the end of October.

And despite Montenegrin striker Dejan Damjanovic levelling the scores in the return fixture at Tianhe Stadium after Brazilian striker Elkeson had opened the scoring for the home side, the 3-3 aggregate score was enough for Guangzhou to become the first Chinese side since Liaoning in 1990 to be crowned Asian club champions.

"You should look at the Round of 16 when we beat the Australian team 2-1 and then 3-0. Then we went off to Qatar and

we beat them there and beat them at home. We beat Kashiwa 4-1 away and then beat them 4-0 at home, so obviously I think you should recognise that we deserve to be champions this year," said Lippi, who is the first coach to win both the UEFA and AFC Champions League titles having won the European equivalent in 1996 with Italian giants Juventus.

"I would like to personally justify this by saying that I lost a UEFA Champions League final against AC Milan and they hadn't won any of their previous three Champions League matches, they drew them all and we lost on penalties. They won and became champions of the UEFA Champions League.

"Anything can happen, but I think this year in all of Asia throughout this year, we are the team that deserves this the most."

With FC Seoul securing Korean representation in the final for a fifth consecutive season having beaten Iran's Esteghlal 4-2 on aggregate in the semi-finals, Choi Yong-soo's side made the ideal start to the first leg in front of a crowd of 55,501 at Seoul World Cup Stadium through Sergio Escudero's 11th minute strike.

Guangzhou had secured Chinese representation in the continental final for the first time since Dalian Wanda lost the 1998 Asian Club Championship decider to Korea Republic's Pohang Steelers following a comprehensive 8-1 aggregate victory over Japan's Kashiwa Reysol in the semi-finals.

And Elkeson notched his fifth goal in as many AFC Champions League games to level the score 16 minutes before half-time.

China international Gao Lin then added to the Brazilian's header a minute before the hour mark only for Montenegrin striker

Damjanovic to equalise with seven minutes remaining.

In the return fixture in front of a 55,847 crowd at Tianhe Stadium, Guangzhou dominated for the majority of the first half of the second leg and Elkeson finally broke the deadlock just before the hour mark to maintain his goal-a-game average in the AFC Champions League.

Even though Damjanovic levelled the scores soon after with his fifth goal in six games, FC Seoul were unable to find a second to hand Korea a fourth AFC Champions League win in five years.

"Since February 26 when we started to play in the competition against Jiangsu, my players were always looking forward. They were running and doing everything to achieve our objectives," said FC Seoul coach Choi Yong-soo following the second leg of the final.

"There were some happy times for my players, but there was only one objective and that was to be champions, and we couldn't achieve it. We have to accept that and we feel sorry about it but that's football."

Although he failed to add to his 13 AFC Champions League goals in the final, Brazilian striker Muriqui was named as the tournament's MVP and leading goalscorer.

"This was a tough match because the competition is fierce and the opposition was tough," said Muriqui.

"In the last game in Korea we played out a 2-2 draw and that laid a solid foundation for us to come back to Guangzhou.

"We had an advantage playing the second leg here and we took advantage of that. We played with our own style and we won."



FINAL	
	
Guangzhou Evergrande	FC Seoul
3-3	
Guangzhou Evergrande win on away goals after 3-3 draw on aggregate	
26/10/13 FC Seoul 2 (Sergio Escudero 11, Dejan Damjanovic 83) Guangzhou Evergrande 2 (Elkeson 30, Gao Lin 58)	09/11/13 Guangzhou Evergrande 1 (Elkeson 58) FC Seoul 1 (Dejan Damjanovic 63)
Seoul World Cup Stadium Attendance : 55,501	Tianhe Sports Center Stadium Attendance : 55,847



Kuwait SC Retain AFC Cup Title



Brazilian Rogerinho scored and provided the assist for tournament leading scorer Issam Jemaa as defending champions Kuwait Sports Club retained the AFC Cup title with a 2-0 win over fellow Kuwait Premier League side Al Qadsia at the start of November.

Al Qadsia had edged a cagey first half at the Peace & Friendship Stadium only for 2012 AFC Foreign Player of the Year Rogerinho to open the scoring in spectacular fashion seven minutes after half-time with his seventh goal of the campaign.

And four minutes after the hour mark Rogerinho's persistence paid off again and Tunisian striker Jemaa was presented with a simple finish to take his AFC Cup tally for the season to 16 as Kuwait SC, who also won the title in 2009, became the first side to win the tournament for a third time.

"We congratulate all our fans with this important victory which means that we are the team which has won the AFC Cup the most as this is our third title and the second under my leadership and I'm really proud

with this achievement," said Romanian coach Marin Ion.

"The first half of the match was conservative from the two teams and we didn't have a good performance especially when it came to the attacking side and the ball was circulating in the midfield.

"In the second half, things improved and we started to create good chances with ease and quick pace and this helped us to reach the goal of Al Qadsia more and more and we created gaps in the midfield which gave us the advantage."

Kuwait SC had earned a place in the final for a fourth time in five years having recorded a 7-2 aggregate win over India's East Bengal in the semi-finals, while Al Qadsia beat two-time champions Al Faisaly from Jordan 3-1 on aggregate to set-up the all-Kuwaiti final.

Following a cautious start from both sides, Al Qadsia were unlucky not to open the scoring after 17 minutes as Omar Al Suma saw his header crash into the face of the upright with Kuwait SC goalkeeper Musab Al Kandari beaten.

The conservative nature of the contest continued as the half progressed, although Al Qadsia did reach the interval as the stronger side with a 34th minute Mesad Al Enzi free-kick that went narrowly over the crossbar while Kuwait SC's attacking duo of Jemaa and Rogerinho were kept quiet for the majority of the opening 45 minutes.

But just seven minutes after the restart Rogerinho drove unchallenged towards the Al Qadsia penalty area, and with the home defence backing off, the Brazilian unleashed

an unstoppable 30 yard strike which viciously swerved away from the despairing dive of goalkeeper Nawaf Al Khaldi.

The goal brought the game to life as Rogerinho then drew an unconvincing save from Al Khaldi before Kuwait SC survived a scramble inside their penalty area just before the hour mark.

But with a little over two-thirds of the contest completed, Rogerinho dispossessed Al Qadsia defender Khaled Al Qahtani on the edge of the penalty area, and after charging towards goal, the Brazilian squared the ball for Jemaa to fire high into the net from just outside the six yard area.



Al Qahtani almost made amends for his mistake eight minutes later only for the defender to see his header back across goal acrobatically pushed away by Kuwait SC goalkeeper Al Kandari.

Kuwait SC again rode their luck with 11 minutes remaining as defender Fahad Al Reshidi had to be alert to clear Saif Al Hashan's effort off the line with Al Kandari out of position as Al Qadsia saw their hopes of a maiden title extinguished.

"I want to congratulate Kuwait and also Al Qadsia for their performance and at the end of the day there are no losers because the title will remain in Kuwait after two teams reached the final of the competition," said Al Qadsia coach Mohammad Ibrahim.

"We were not bad during the match and we were the better side overall, but Kuwait knew how to strike and score goals while we failed to transform our superiority in the first half and take the lead."



SEMI-FINALS	
East Bengal v Kuwait SC 01/10/13 Kuwait SC 4 (Issam Jemaa 17, 33, Waleed Jumah 32, Chadi Hammami 48) East Bengal 2 (Uga Okpara 65, Ralte Lalrindika 87) 22/10/13 East Bengal 0 Kuwait SC 3 (Rogerinho 43, Hadi Khamees 44, Das Abhishek 87 OG) Kuwait SC win 7-2 on aggregate	Al Faisaly v Al Qadsia 02/10/13 Al Qadsia 2 (Khaled Al Qahtani 38, Mesad Nada 77) Al Faisaly 1 Faisaly 1 (Roberto De Souza 82) 22/10/13 Al Faisaly 0 Al Qadsia 1 (Saleh Al Sheikh 77) Al Qadsia win 3-1 on aggregate
FINAL	
	Al Qadsia v Kuwait SC 0-2 (Rogerinho 52, Issam Jemaa 64) 



Unbeaten Korea Republic Land U-19 Women's Crown



Lee So-dam's first half penalty proved crucial as Korea Republic edged out Australia 2-1 on the final Matchday of the 2013 AFC U-19 Women's Championship to win the title for a second time.

Captain Jang Sel-gi's opener and Lee's decisive spot-kick meant Korea Republic completed an unbeaten campaign to triumph at the championships they had previously won in 2004.

Meanwhile, DPR Korea's goalless draw with Japan at Jiangning Sports Centre meant that they had to settle for a runners-up spot, and they, along with hosts China and their southern neighbours Korea Republic, will now represent Asia at the 2014 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup in Canada.

Korea Republic had gone into the final round of fixtures of the six-team round-robin tournament with a one point cushion over DPR Korea, knowing that a win against Australia would be enough to secure the Championship.

"We expected this game to be tough because we had a tough match with DPR Korea and the players had an issue on

recovery for the last match," said Korea Republic coach Jong Song-chon.

"Even though we had some difficulties, the players overcame these very well with their strong mentality. In Asia, it's quite difficult to qualify for the U-20 Women's World Cup. We have other strong teams here."

Korea had started with a 2-2 draw against China before ending the campaign with four consecutive wins against Myanmar, Japan, DPR Korea and Australia.

"We prepared for the match with strong teams in Korea. Throughout this tournament we did our best with our tactics. The players showed their skills and tactics on the pitch. That's one of the reasons that we could win the tournament," added Jong.

DPR Korea eventually finished three points behind Korea Republic after beating Australia, China and Myanmar.

"Our players did their best and did not

give up until the end," said DPR Korea coach Hwang Yong-bong following the draw with Japan.

"Now we have qualified for the World Cup which was our main goal. I am happy with that but we still have a lot of things to fix to play better football in the future."

And China claimed the second berth at the 2014 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup ahead of Japan after crucially beating Myanmar 8-0 on the final Matchday.

"We knew that we had to win this match and get goals as many as possible. So we enhanced our attacking to seek more goals. Fortunately we scored six in the first half; that I didn't expect," said China coach Wang Jun.

"I know when we got a draw with Japan there might be lack of confidence among the fans in us to qualify for the World Cup, but we never gave up. We believed in our team."



	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	5	4	1	0	15	4	11	13
DPR Korea	5	3	1	1	10	4	6	10
China	5	2	2	1	14	6	8	8
Japan	5	2	2	1	11	4	7	8
Australia	5	1	0	4	6	12	-6	3
Myanmar	5	0	0	5	0	26	-26	0

11/10/13
China 2 (Zhu Beiyuan 29, Song Duan 76)
Korea Republic 2 (Jang Sel-gi 52, Lee Geum-min 89)
Japan 7 (Akari Shiraki 8, Akari Kurishima 10, Mina Tanaka 12, 16, Ayaka Michigami 26, Marin Hamamoto 66, Ayaka Onoue 90+2) Myanmar 0
DPR Korea 6 (Kim Phyoung-hwa 2, Kim So-hyang 13, 52, Ri Un-sim 67, 70, 84) Australia 2 (Chloe Logarzo 39, Hayley Raso 77)
13/10/13
Korea Republic 7 (Jang Sel-gi 12, 17, 21, 53, 78, Choe Yu-ri, 33, 38) Myanmar 0
Australia 0 Japan 2 (Yui Hasegawa 49, Rin Sumida 80)
DPR Korea 1 (Jon So-yon 5) China 0
15/10/13
Japan 0 Korea Republic 2 (Kim In-ji 74, Choe Yu-ri 76)
Myanmar 0 DPR Korea 2 (Ri Un-sim 26, Kim Mi-gyeong 88)

Australia 1 (Hayley Raso 47)
China 2 (Wang Shuang 78, 79)
18/10/13
Korea Republic 2 (Lee Geum-min 30, Jang Sel-gi 36)
DPR Korea 1 (Ri Un-sim 49)
Myanmar 0 Australia 2 (Amy Harrison 50, Brittany Whitfield 51)
China 2 (Song Duan 45, Le Mengwen 54)
Japan 2 (Ayaka Michigami 27, Hikaru Naomoto 58)
20/10/13
Japan 0 DPR Korea 0
Australia 1 (Georgia Yeoman-Dale 33)
Korea Republic 2 (Jang Sel-gi 20, Lee So-dam 41)
Myanmar 0 China 8 (Li Mengwen 11, Lv Yueyun 19, Wang Shuang 32, 45, 89, Song Duan 34, Zhao Xinzhai 39, Li Xiang 57)



Meet the world at 40,000 feet

Some of the most memorable moments on Earth, aren't even happening on Earth. Find inspiration in the Onboard Lounge, refresh in a Shower Spa, and relax in your First Class Private Suite. Say hello to the Emirates A380.

Hello Tomorrow



Qualifiers Confirmed



Group winners Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran, Oman, Indonesia, DPR Korea, Japan and Vietnam along with hosts Myanmar and best second-placed finishers Uzbekistan, Yemen, China, Australia, Korea Republic and Thailand qualified for the 2014 AFC U-19 Championship.

With Myanmar being confirmed as hosts in April last year, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran, Oman, Indonesia, DPR Korea, Japan and Vietnam claimed the nine automatic qualification berths after winning their respective groups during October's qualifiers.

And Uzbekistan, Yemen, China, Australia, Korea Republic and Thailand eventually completed the 16-team line-up for the tournament which will take place in Myanmar in October.

Qatar won Group A with a 100% record ahead of Uzbekistan, who comfortably claimed second place following wins over India, Turkmenistan and Nepal.

The pattern was repeated in Group B as the United Arab Emirates won all four of their games to qualify automatically, with Yemen claiming second place with wins over Jordan, the Maldives and Afghanistan.

Iraq advanced from Group C ahead of Bangladesh and Kuwait after scoring nine unanswered goals in three games, while Iran won every game to win Group D ahead of Saudi Arabia.

Oman, meanwhile, won their three-team group after beating both Palestine and Bahrain without conceding a goal, while Vietnam and Australia advanced from Group F.

Vietnam topped the table after winning all three games, while Australia were confirmed as one of the six best second-placed finishers after beating Hong Kong and Chinese Taipei.

Captain Evan Dimas Darmono scored a hat-trick as Indonesia beat Korea Republic 3-2 on the final matchday in Group G to top the table, as both sides qualified for this year's championship.

In Group H, DPR Korea were flawless in scoring 12 goals in three games without conceding to take maximum points, while Thailand beat Singapore and Brunei Darussalam to join them in Myanmar.

Finally, Japan and China shared a 1-1 draw on the final Matchday in Group I to advance after the pair had each beaten Malaysia and Macau.

The 16-team 2014 AFC U-19 Championship will take place in Myanmar from October 9-23, with the tournament acting as the qualifiers for the 2015 FIFA U-20 World Cup.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	4	4	0	0	13	1	12	12
Uzbekistan	4	3	0	1	10	2	8	9
India	4	1	1	2	3	7	-4	4
Turkmenistan	4	1	1	2	4	11	-7	4
Nepal	4	0	0	4	1	10	-9	0

04/10/13
Nepal 1 Turkmenistan 2
India 0 Qatar 2
06/10/13
Turkmenistan 0 Uzbekistan 1
Nepal 0 India 1
08/10/13
Uzbekistan 5 Nepal 0
Qatar 7 Turkmenistan 0
10/10/13
India 0 Uzbekistan 3
Qatar 2 Nepal 1
12/10/13
Turkmenistan 2 India 2
Uzbekistan 1 Qatar 2

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE	4	4	0	0	15	1	14	12
Yemen	4	3	0	1	9	3	6	9
Jordan	4	1	1	2	3	5	-2	4
Maldives	4	1	1	2	1	8	-7	4
Afghanistan	4	0	0	4	1	12	-11	0

04/10/13
Afghanistan 0 Maldives 1
Yemen 1 UAE 2
06/10/13
Afghanistan 0 Yemen 3
Maldives 0 Jordan 0
08/10/13
UAE 5 Maldives 0
Jordan 2 Afghanistan 1
10/10/13
UAE 6 Afghanistan 0
Yemen 2 Jordan 1
12/10/13
Maldives 0 Yemen 3
Jordan 0 UAE 2

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iraq	3	2	1	0	9	0	9	7
Bangladesh	3	1	1	1	1	6	-5	4
Kuwait	3	1	1	1	3	2	1	4
Pakistan	3	0	1	2	1	6	-5	1

08/10/13
Kuwait 3 Pakistan 1
Iraq 6 Bangladesh 0
10/10/13
Pakistan 0 Iraq 3
Bangladesh 1 Kuwait 0
12/10/13
Pakistan 0 Bangladesh 0
Iraq 0 Kuwait 0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iran	3	3	0	0	9	1	8	9
Saudi Arabia	3	2	0	1	7	2	5	6
Lebanon	3	0	1	2	2	8	-6	1
Tajikistan	3	0	1	2	0	7	-7	1

08/10/13
Saudi Arabia 2 Lebanon 1
Iran 2 Tajikistan 0
10/10/13
Tajikistan 0 Saudi Arabia 5
Lebanon 1 Iran 6
12/10/13
Lebanon 0 Tajikistan 0
Iran 1 Saudi Arabia 0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Oman	2	2	0	0	3	0	3	6
Palestine	2	0	1	1	1	2	-1	1
Bahrain	2	0	1	1	1	3	-2	1

08/10/13
Oman 2 Bahrain 0
10/10/13
Palestine 0 Oman 1
12/10/13
Bahrain 1 Palestine 1

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Vietnam	3	3	0	0	16	3	13	9
Australia	3	2	0	1	11	5	6	6
Hong Kong	3	1	0	2	2	12	-10	3
Chinese Taipei	3	0	0	3	1	10	-9	0

03/10/13
Australia 7 Hong Kong 0
Vietnam 6 Chinese Taipei 1
05/10/13
Hong Kong 1 Vietnam 5
Chinese Taipei 0 Australia 3
07/10/13
Australia 1 Vietnam 5
Chinese Taipei 1 Hong Kong 0

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Indonesia	3	3	0	0	9	2	7	9
Korea Republic	3	2	0	1	11	4	7	6
Philippines	3	0	1	2	2	8	-6	1
Laos	3	0	1	2	3	11	-8	1

08/10/13
Korea Republic 4 Philippines 0
Indonesia 4 Laos 0
10/10/13
Laos 1 Korea Republic 5
Philippines 0 Indonesia 2
12/10/13
Laos 2 Philippines 2
Korea Republic 2 Indonesia 3

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
DPR Korea	3	3	0	0	12	0	12	9
Thailand	3	2	0	1	10	2	8	6
Singapore	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Brunei	3	0	0	3	1	16	-15	0

08/10/13
Korea Republic 4 Philippines 0
Indonesia 4 Laos 0
10/10/13
Laos 1 Korea Republic 5
Philippines 0 Indonesia 2
12/10/13
Laos 2 Philippines 2
Korea Republic 2 Indonesia 3

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	2	1	0	12	2	10	7
China	3	2	1	0	7	2	5	7
Malaysia	3	1	0	2	7	8	-1	3
Macau	0	0	0	3	0	14	-14	0

08/10/13
Japan 6 Macau 0
China 3 Malaysia 1
10/10/13
Macau 0 China 3
Malaysia 1 Japan 5
12/10/13
Malaysia 5 Macau 0
Japan 1 China 1



Field Of 16 Set For AFC Futsal Championship

Qualifying round winners China, Uzbekistan and Lebanon as well as Chinese Taipei, Korea Republic, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Iraq, Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia all advanced to the 2014 AFC Futsal Championship which will be held in Vietnam.

Defending champions Japan, 2012 AFC Futsal Championship runners-up Thailand and third-placed finishers Iran had already earned direct qualification, with hosts Vietnam also qualifying automatically.

China won the East Zone qualifiers by virtue of a superior goal-difference over runner-up Chinese Taipei.

Both sides had recorded unbeaten records with three wins and a draw, but China's superior defensive and offensive efforts – the team scored 18 goals and conceded just two

in four games – meant they topped the group.

Korea's qualifying campaign saw them score more goals than both China and Chinese Taipei, but they ultimately finished four points adrift in third place following defeats by the table-topping pair.

Uzbekistan, meanwhile, won the South and Central Zone qualifiers ahead of second-placed Tajikistan with a perfect record.

Uzbekistan plundered 20 goals in just three games, including a convincing 10-1 defeat of Turkmenistan.

And that defeat contributed to Turkmenistan missing out on qualification for the finals, with Kyrgyzstan claiming third place in the four-team group on goal difference.

In the West, Lebanon edged three close games over Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and secured a draw against Kuwait to top their group by two points.

Kuwait, who were also undefeated in qualifying with two wins and two draws, took

the runners-up spot.

Iraq, who finished a further three points adrift, secured the one remaining qualifying place after they shared a 1-1 draw with Qatar in the final round of fixtures.

Finally, with October's 2013 AFF Futsal Championship doubling as the qualifying round for the ASEAN zone, tournament hosts Thailand cemented their position as the dominant team in South East Asia after winning the regional title with a 100% record.

Thailand won their record ninth title with a 2-1 victory over Australia in the final, but having already achieved qualification for the 2014 AFC Futsal Championship along with third-placed Vietnam, Australia, fourth-placed side Indonesia, and Malaysia advanced to the finals.

The 16-team 2014 AFC Futsal Championship is set to take place in Vietnam from April 30 to May 10.



EAST

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
China	4	3	1	0	18	2	16	10
Chinese Taipei	4	3	1	0	14	8	6	10
Korea Republic	4	2	0	2	19	10	9	6
Hong Kong	4	1	0	3	10	23	-13	3
Macau	4	0	0	4	5	23	-18	0

03/10/13
China 9 Macau 0
Chinese Taipei 4 Hong Kong 2
04/10/13
Hong Kong 0 China 5
Macau 1 Korea Republic 5
05/10/13
Korea Republic 3 Chinese Taipei 5
Macau 3 Hong Kong 6
06/10/13
Chinese Taipei 3 Macau 1
Korea Republic 0 China 2
07/10/13
Hong Kong 2 Korea Republic 11
China 2 Chinese Taipei 2

WEST

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lebanon	4	3	1	0	13	9	4	10
Kuwait	4	2	2	0	13	7	6	10
Iraq	4	1	2	1	8	8	0	5
Qatar	4	0	2	2	5	10	-5	2
Saudi Arabia	4	0	1	3	10	15	-5	1

08/12/13
Kuwait 6 Saudi Arabia 3
Lebanon 4 Iraq 3
09/12/13
Iraq 1 Kuwait 1
Saudi Arabia 2 Qatar 2
10/12/13
Qatar 1 Lebanon 3
Saudi Arabia 2 Iraq 3
11/12/13
Lebanon 4 Saudi Arabia 3
Qatar 1 Kuwait 4
12/12/13
Iraq 1 Qatar 1
Kuwait 2 Lebanon 2

SOUTH & CENTRAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Uzbekistan	3	3	0	0	20	6	14	9
Tajikistan	3	2	0	1	17	13	4	6
Kyrgyzstan	3	0	1	2	7	15	-8	1
Turkmenistan	3	0	1	2	7	17	-10	1

05/11/13
Kyrgyzstan 4 Tajikistan 8
Uzbekistan 10 Turkmenistan 1
06/11/13
Turkmenistan 2 Kyrgyzstan 2
Tajikistan 4 Uzbekistan 5
07/11/13
Tajikistan 5 Turkmenistan 4
Uzbekistan 5 Kyrgyzstan 1

ASEAN

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Thailand	4	4	0	0	36	4	32	12
Vietnam	4	3	0	1	18	10	8	9
Malaysia	4	2	0	2	26	10	16	6
Philippines	4	1	0	3	9	50	-41	3
Brunei	4	0	0	4	10	25	-15	0

19/10/13
Malaysia 1 Vietnam 2
Brunei Darussalam 3 Philippines 5
20/10/13
Philippines 1 Thailand 20
Brunei Darussalam 4 Malaysia 8
21/10/13
Thailand 8 Brunei Darussalam 1
Vietnam 10 Philippines 1
22/10/13
Brunei Darussalam 2 Vietnam 4
Malaysia 0 Thailand 2
23/10/13
Philippines 2 Malaysia 17
Vietnam 2 Thailand 6

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Australia	4	4	0	0	36	4	32	12
Indonesia	4	3	0	1	32	11	21	9
Myanmar	4	2	0	2	19	10	9	6
Timor Leste	4	0	1	3	4	32	-28	1
Laos	4	0	1	3	3	37	-34	1

19/10/13
Myanmar 3 Indonesia 5
Laos 2 Timor Leste 2
20/10/13
Timor Leste 1 Australia 8
Laos 1 Myanmar 6
21/10/13
Australia 17 Laos 0
Indonesia 12 Timor Leste 1
22/10/13
Laos 0 Indonesia 12
Myanmar 0 Australia 4
23/10/13
Timor Leste 0 Myanmar 10
Indonesia 3 Australia 7

Semi-Finals

25/10/13
Thailand 10 Indonesia 4
Australia 6 Vietnam 1

Third Place Play-Off

27/10/13
Indonesia 3 Vietnam 7

Final

27/10/13
Thailand 2 Australia 1

Project Future Coaches Graduate

Following two years of intensive and rigorous training, 16 members of the AFC Project Future Coaches programme graduated in December.

The Batch 2011 finished their programme by taking the AFC 'B' Coaching Certificate Course following several other extension courses which included an attachment with AFC Champions League winners Guangzhou Evergrande in August.

"We've been working together in the programme in the last two years and they have been performing well throughout the programme and in the various courses. I'm also impressed

by their enthusiasm and the efforts they make during the training," said B' certificate course instructor Mike Wong.

"I hope they will work even harder in the coaching world and continue their education because finishing the two-year programme is not the end but rather a beginning. I hope they will be able to fulfil the AFC's aspiration for coaches of the future, help develop football in their MAs and chart an exciting career for themselves.

"I also hope that their respective MAs will bank on the Project Future Coaches graduates' experience and knowledge either at a club or national level."



Three More Associations Join 'Kick Off'

Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Brunei Darussalam joined the "Kick Off" programme after their proposals were accepted by the AFC Development Committee under the chairmanship of His Royal Highness Prince Abdullah Ibn Sultan Ahmad Shah.

His Royal Highness Prince Abdullah expressed his satisfaction at the response received by the 'Kick Off' programme from the Member Associations and asked the administration to work towards achieving positive results.

He also asked to look at the possibility of creating commercial value for the 'Kick Off' programme beneficiaries.

The committee was also informed of the progress of the 13 projects in Australia, Bangladesh, Chinese Taipei, Iran, Jordan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, the UAE and Yemen.



AFC Steps Up Battle Against Match Fixing

An agreement between the AFC and sports and betting-related data provider Sportradar is the latest initiative in the fight against match-fixing.

Under the agreement, Sportradar will monitor a number of competitions including the AFC Champions League, AFC Cup and 2015 AFC Asian Cup and qualifiers for signs of suspicious activities.

"AFC's partnership with Sportradar is the latest step taken to counter the threat that match-fixing poses to football in Asia," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Alex Soosay.

"This is a historic development in AFC's fight against match manipulation. It is also a very crucial element in our campaign against this menace.

"I'd also like to call upon all football stakeholders, including our Member Associations, to join hands with us in this campaign. FIFA and the Malaysian government are also supportive to our initiatives.

"We look forward to utilising Sportradar's proven expertise in this field and developing an effective working partnership."

The AFC has previously taken various other measures to protect the integrity of the Asian game including the setting up of an internal task force and the new Integrity in Sport Department, creating awareness during professional player seminars under its 'Kick Off' development programme and by co-hosting the INTERPOL International Conference – Match-Fixing: The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game in February.

"Sportradar is prepared to do its part to help the AFC fight match-fixing in football," said Sportradar CEO Carsten Koerl. "I'd also like to commend the continental football body for being proactive in this endeavour because match manipulation in sports has taken a different twist with the involvement of sophisticated international organised crime organisations.

"Sportradar is honoured to have the opportunity to utilise our technology and expertise to work closely with the AFC to help protect the integrity of Asian football."



Coaches Move Closer to 'A' Licence

Asia's latest batch of top level coaches participated in the AFC 'A' Football Coaching Certificate Course in Korea Republic in November and December.

A total of 27 holders of both 'C' and 'B' Coaching Certificates took part in the 27 day course, which included a minimum of 148 hours of instruction.

The course is designed to educate coaches in tactical and advanced technical requirements of teams and team management, while also educating participants on the physiological and psychological needs of the players.

Students are examined on the practical and theoretical aspects of the game, while they are also required to submit and present a dissertation.



Don't Delay. Play!

In an effort to reduce time-wasting and encourage more playing time, the AFC has launched the '60 Minutes - Don't Delay. Play!' campaign following extensive studies undertaken to analyse actual average playing time.

The study found the actual average playing time in all AFC competitions to be just over 52 minutes, compared to over 59 minutes in FIFA competitions and over 63 minutes in major European leagues.

With Asian teams a significant way behind the FIFA average, the '60 Minutes' campaign has been designed in such a way that it will add value to AFC competitions and each match in particular. An increase in average actual playing time is expected to add value and excitement for the fans, improve technical quality of play, while also increasing interest from broadcasters.

A concerted effort to promote '60 Minutes' will be undertaken with a series of measures, including education programmes for referees, coaches and teams. The '60 Minutes' campaign will begin with the inaugural AFC U-22 Championship in Oman, continue with the 2014 AFC Champions League and AFC Cup before culminating at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.



AFC & UNAIDS Unite To Raise HIV Awareness



The AFC and UNAIDS signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the end of November to pave the way for joint advocacy activities to enhance awareness of HIV.

Through the agreement, both organisations will carry out activities during selected competitions organised by the AFC in support of the UNAIDS' Protect the Goal campaign, which is a new initiative within the framework of UNAIDS' sports for global advocacy programme.

The AFC and UNAIDS recognise that concerted action through cooperative partnerships with key stakeholders including governments, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations and the private sector is required.

The campaign will highlight the shared commitments of UNAIDS and the AFC to enhance awareness of HIV, improve access to HIV prevention and treatment and eliminate HIV-related stigma and discrimination in advance

of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil.

"The AFC is proud to take these steps to share our responsibility in creating awareness of HIV in Asia," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

"Sometimes people think football is just a game, and yes it is, but actually it's more than that. Football has the power to make great contribution to society."

"Our obligation to this cause is 100%. I hope the AFC and UNAIDS will be able to gain the support from everyone to bring more awareness of HIV to society."

To add to the collaboration, the AFC has initiated a joint programme with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNAIDS which will embark on a new football-based HIV

prevention programme to tackle the risk of HIV transmission among young people.

The campaign will be co-organised and co-funded by the ADB and AFC with technical and country-specific implementation and campaign support provided by UNAIDS.



Kick-Off For One Goal

The AFC has teamed up with partners World Vision, DSM, Global Alliance for Improving Nutrition and the Asian Football Development Project to launch the 'One Goal' campaign to ensure that children across Asia eat, live and play right.

Focused on providing nutrition for every child in Asia by leveraging the power of and the passion for football in the region, the 'One Goal' campaign will seek to tackle the poor nutritional practices and access that have been holding back Asia and Asian football.

Asia is home to close to 578 million of the one billion malnourished people around the world, while some 100 million of the 165 million children globally who are stunted due to chronic under-nutrition are Asian.

The campaign will seek to transform child nutrition in the Asian region by engaging players, fans and football lovers to become ambassadors for good nutritional practices and engage governments to invest more in helping children access nutritious foods.

"The One Goal campaign is part of the AFC's long term social responsibility strategy," said FIFA Vice President and co-chair of the Open Goal board, HRH Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein.

"We are glad that we are able to partner with global organisations like World Vision, DSM and GAIN to grow champions, both on and off the field in Asia."



BUKIT JALIL NATIONAL STADIUM

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The 100,000 capacity National Stadium is located to the south of Kuala Lumpur and is part of the National Sports Complex in Bukit Jalil which was built to host the 1998 Commonwealth Games.

Construction on the stadium began in 1994 with the venue declared open in July 1998.

The other facilities at the complex include the Putra Indoor Stadium, the National Aquatic Centre, the National Hockey Stadium

and the National Squash Centre which were also used during the 16th Commonwealth Games.

When the stadium is not in use, the seats which are in various colours create the visual effect of the Malaysian flag in motion.

The multi-purpose National Stadium is the home of the Malaysia football team, while the venue is also used for music concerts.

Covering 76,000 square metres of land, it was the main Malaysian venue for the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, and after hosting matches in the group stage, the National Stadium was used for

Korea Republic's penalty shootout victory over Iran in the quarter-finals.

Korea remained at the same venue for their semi-final against Iraq, but this time the eventual champions prevailed on penalties.

The venue also hosted the 21st Southeast Asian Games in 2001, while it has been used for numerous high-profile football matches involving the likes of English Premier League giants Chelsea, Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United.

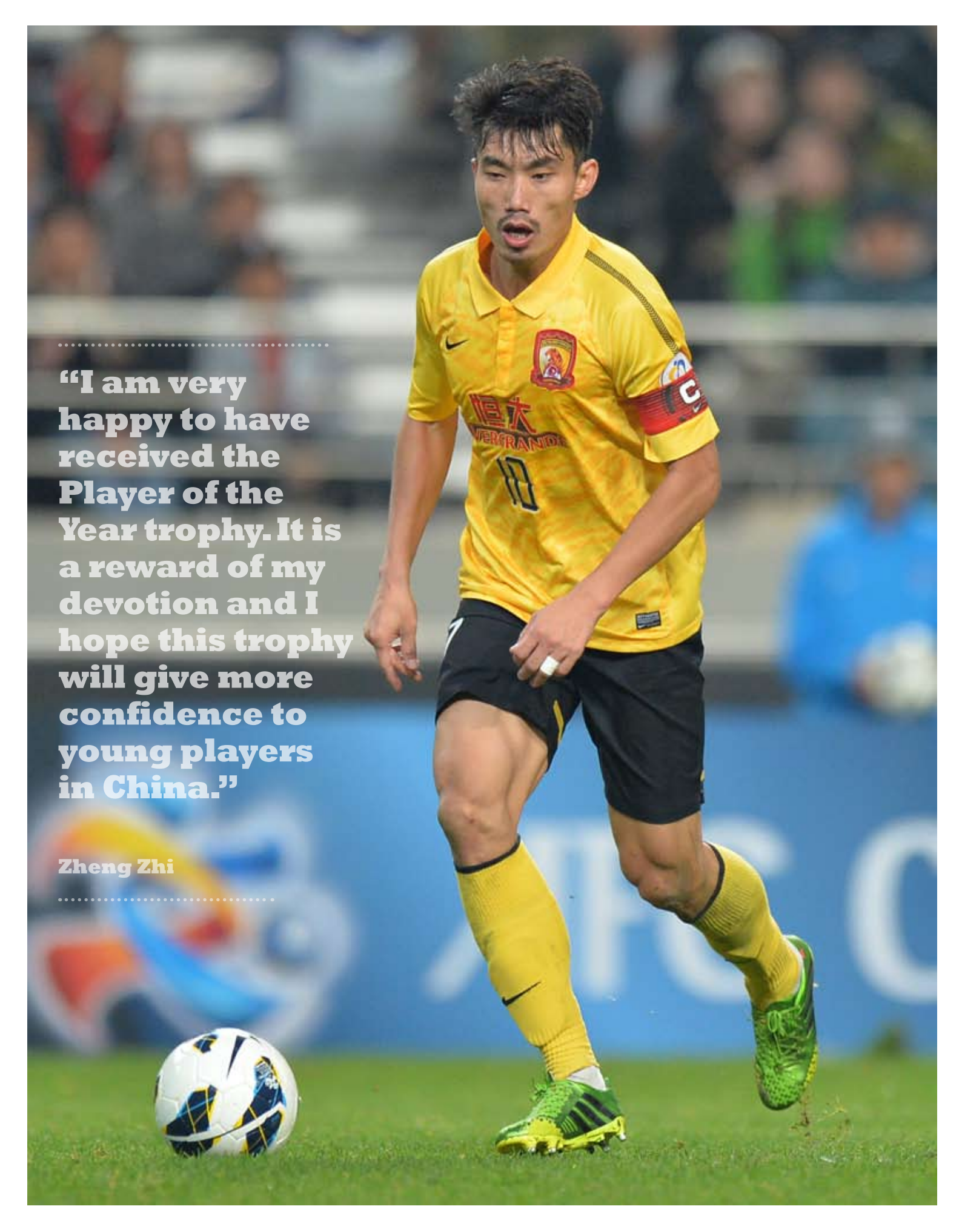


TOYOTA

G
TOYOTA
MOVES
YOU



<http://www.toyota-global.com/>

A full-page photograph of Zheng Zhi, a Chinese professional footballer, in action on a green pitch. He is wearing a yellow jersey with the Chinese characters '恒大' (Evergrande) and the name 'VERGRANDE' on the front, along with the number 10. He is also wearing black shorts, yellow socks, and bright green football boots. A white and blue soccer ball is on the ground near his feet. The background is a blurred stadium filled with spectators.

.....
**“I am very
happy to have
received the
Player of the
Year trophy. It is
a reward of my
devotion and I
hope this trophy
will give more
confidence to
young players
in China.”**

Zheng Zhi

.....